HEAVY OBJECT Volume 8

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ヘヴィーオブジェクト 七〇%の支配者

「もー!!　駄目だ、ぜんっぜん勝てる気がしない!!」

今度の舞台は極東洋上に浮かぶ『資本企業』の一角にして、オブジェクトの始まりの地『島国』。『資本企業』の暴走した自防ＰＭＣ戦力を巻き込んだアジア圏海洋戦で、かつてない強敵オブジェクトの出現に窮地に陥るクウェンサーたち。

そんな危機の中、彼らのもとに現れた心強い協力者――。クウェンサーに巨乳を押し付ける天然ビッチ系の女囚！　そして主人であるヘイヴィアを「クソ虫」呼ばわりして痛めつけるウィンチェル家所属の眼帯美人メイドさん！

……果たしてこれで本当に勝てるのか近未来アクション!!

か-12-47

ヘヴィーオブジェクト 七〇%の支配者

鎌池和馬

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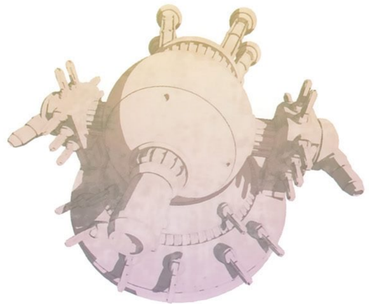

鎌池和馬（かまち かずま）

本日のレプリカント的観察日記。オオアリクイ！　なんと言ってもにゅるにゅる長い舌が特徴。五本指のロボットアームが複雑すぎる場合、こういう所から攻めてみるのもありなのかな？　とか思いました。

【電撃文庫作品】

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）①～㉒
とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）SS①②
新約 とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）①～⑨
ヘヴィーオブジェクト シリーズ計八冊
インテリビレッジの座敷童①～③
簡単なアンケートです
簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情

イラスト：凪良（なぎりょう）

バンダイナムコのゲーム『アルトネリコ』シリーズのキャラクターデザインをつとめる。電撃文庫では『シャープ・エッジ』『F』（著／坂入慎一）、『アプラクサスの夢』（著／高橋弥七郎）などを担当する。個人サークル『S.E.C』でも活動中。
http://www.sec.or.tv/

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

Dominion 70% 七〇%の支配者

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【ビーアブレイズ】BE ABLAZE

『資本企業』の『島国』が運用する水陸両用第一世代のオブジェクト。暴走した自防PMCとの内戦を早期終結するために大会社が正式派遣。『資本企業』の正式名称は『ゆうひ』。

第一世代でありながらも機体にバージョンアップを重ね、現役の第二世代に負けず劣らない性能を誇る。主砲はコイルガンとレールガンの多段式加速砲。メインカラーリングは赤銅色。

燃料、酸化剤、薬品などを使った火炎放射によって『火遁の衣』と呼ばれる熱波の壁を何重にも張り巡らせ、黒煙や蜃気楼によってレーザー誘導などの照準情報を歪める近接防御システムを採用している。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

name/Frolaytia=Capistrano
place of birth/Paris, Normandy
age/18
sex/female
weight/51kg
height/1.73m
body size/97.58.81(cm)
hair color/silver(+ blue dye)
eye color/purple
post/commander of OBJECT operation (plural units)
class/Major
belong/37th C.M.B.
HEAVY OBJECT

HEAVYOBJECT
『正統王国』第三七機動整備大隊所属オブジェクト
『ベイビーマグナム』に搭乗する『エリート』
ミリンダ
「……わたしのなかまはまけないよ」
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「憧れの『島国』の
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お手並み拝見と
行こうじゃないか」
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戦地派遣留学生
クウェンサー
「ぐだぐだ言っていると敵に見つかって
先制攻撃を受けるんだろ。とにかく動こう」
南の海に浮かぶ人工島シャトー・ド・ルージュに
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マリアージュ＝
ナイトキャップ
「あ、あのう、それでどうやって
ここから出るつもりなんですか？」
『資本企業』側の破壊工作要員として投入された
『北欧禁猟区』の陸戦PMC『モスグリーン』の指揮官
アンジェラ＝ハイビスカス
「首はもらうぞ、ブードル野郎。
森で生まれて山を統べる狼の恐ろしさを知れ」

戦争へようこそ。
これが今の時代ってヤツだよ、
だからつべこべ言わず存分に楽しむと良い。
死にたくなければな。

――とある僻地勤務の留学生のつぶやき

HEAVY OBJECT

Dominion 70%

ヘヴィーオブジェクト

七〇%の支配者

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

From ■■■ to the age of Objects.

It's rumored that it was due to the fall of the UN, but the real reason was ■■■■■■.

At the time, I was sent out as a student soldier. Yes, that was when we were in the middle of the first extreme aging society, so the working population had dropped drastically. Both agriculture and commerce were practically empty. The only thing left to rely on was intellectual property. And so everyone started skipping grades like crazy. I was already in graduate school by the time I got my first period.

But I digress. Let's get back on track.

In the end, ■■■, ■■■, ■■■, and everyone else wanted some kind of event.

Humans ■■■ too much ■■■. ■■■■■■ at least five or six times. The next thing we knew, ■■■■■■■■■ was gone. It wasn't just that ■■■ was focusing on ■■■ of ■■■■■■. Even creating ■■■ wasn't enough to ■■■. Weapons began to stagnate and stopped advancing. To put it simply, there was no excitement in ■■■■. Once the upper limit was reached, responsibility had to be taken for the arms reduction. As a final ■■■, what else was there other than ■■■■? And the negligence of those high-cost ■■■ had to have been ■■■■■■ to the anti-government side.

Everyone was hoping for the appearance of ■■■■■■.

A love of bigger and bigger ships and guns was perfect. We had ■■■■ as an obvious ■■■■■ and, unlike with ■■■■■■ , the entire earth could not be supplied to ■■■■. In other words , ■■■ and ■■■ were split and ■■■■ could be watched a lot like a sports match.

Everyone dreamed of the arrival of ■■■■■■.

The Island Nation decided to play the villain. As if it had been arranged in advance, ■■■■■■■■■ formed a ■■■■, brought out all sorts of exaggerated ■■■■, and challenged ■■ ■■■.

Even the later ■■■■ was ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■. Fairly and justly, ■■■■■■■■■ and ■■■■■■. And it was all to create that.

I wonder what's happened to the Island Nation now.

As someone who fled from there, I have no obligation to say anything self-important, but I do have one thought as I watch it from the outside.

What a pitiable country.

(A written version of Legitimacy Kingdom 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion Maintenance Soldier Ayami Cherryblossom 's oral testimony concerning the Island Nation. The original text is

only viewable by those ranked major general or higher, so it is speculated to include some highly classified information.)

Chapter 1: A Resource Which Cannot Be Made Plentiful >> Landing on the Island Nation's Ame-no-Darin

Part 1

From the moment I woke up, I had a bad feeling about the day to come.

The ship's log of the luxury cruise ship Scarlet Princess contained that statement in the Legitimacy Kingdom's official language.

It was 380 meters long, its top speed was 40 knots, and it could hold up to 2500 people. It was on such a grand scale that it was much like tilting a safe country resort on its side and taking it out to sea. Incidentally, the cost of the ship could purchase a resort and an 18-hole golf course with money to spare. All three layers of its deck contained a pool and the rear of the ship even contained a heliport.

Around twenty crew members were packed into the control room.

Electronics and automation had taken great strides forward, so the number of people needed to run the large ship had been drastically cut down. They had three shifts making three times that many crew in total, but that was still less than one hundred. Surprisingly, the number of "waitresses" outnumbered the crew who held the lives of everyone else aboard in their hands.

An elderly man let out a small sigh.

His name was Alfonso Zoom and he was the captain of the luxury cruise ship.

"Captain, we will be entering the Strait of Malacca soon."

"I know."

Alfonso gave a brief reply to the young (even if he was in his thirties) navigation officer.

Just like the Panama Canal, the Strait of Gibraltar, and the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca was a gate of the sea. In its case, it connected the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. It was a narrow passageway and many world powers insisted it was their territory, but it was still the shortest course. Unless it was packed full of military resources or part of a transport fleet protected by an Object, a luxury cruise ship circumnavigating the world had no choice but to use the Strait of Malacca. Simply calculating the ship's fuel expenses made that painfully clear.

Alfonso poured coffee from a thermos and into a mug as he spoke to the young navigation officer.

"Do you know what I'm worried about?"

"It wouldn't be reefs. Is it wreckage of fishing ships that were caught in a storm? I've heard the sea around here isn't very clean."

"My daughters. Joining the military is fine. After all, this is the age of clean wars. But why did both my twin daughters have to

choose to be Black Uniforms in charge of barrier duty? They are both young unmarried women and they chose to throw themselves into the part of the military with the most bullets flying around."

"I see."

"I bet it was a reaction to the extreme education their mother gave them. That came from a complex brought on by newfound riches. She surrounded those two in piano, violin, and ballroom dancing from a young age, so they eventually rejected high society . If you want your daughters to be brought up as proper ladies, why would you show them how oppressive it all is? Don't you agree?"

"Um… Where are you going with this?"

"As captain, I have a lot of spare time to think about a distant safe country. Our course is simple and this isn't all that dangerous an area. You can relax a little."

Alfonso Zoom turned toward the large radio equipment. A few lights were flashing which showed that quite a few radio signals were being sent back and forth in this area of sea. He could tell at a glance that the situation here was complex.

"This is Ship ID PL_055 registered with the Legitimacy Kingdom's Amazon region. Do you have our location? I want to check before heading into the crowded intersection. Over."

"We have you perfectly. GPS, beacon, and radar are all functioning normally. Luxury cruise ship Scarlet Princess, please enter on the path given on the screen. Welcome to the Southeast Asia's main entrance. Over."

"Understood, harbor control. Today is another good day. Out."

As he finished the transmission with the standard greeting, wrinkles of suspicion gradually appeared on the captain's face.

The young navigation officer also looked doubtful.

"Captain, about that transmission…"

"Yes." Alfonso Zoom let out a heavy sigh. "Just as famous people do not refer to themselves as famous, a professional does not normally refer to a luxury cruise ship as 'luxury'."

Then what had that transmission been?

The captain spoke the answer anyone could reach with a little bit of thought.

"They're coming."

Part 2

A ten-man fishing boat raced toward the luxury cruise ship while jumping from stormy wave to stormy wave. Yes, it was racing. The entire engine had been swapped out, so it was moving

"above" the ocean while practically popping a wheelie. It was moving at about 80 kph. As hydrofoils made quite evident, boats could move at three digit speeds if the water resistance was lessened. And the fastest way to do that was to lift the boat itself above the water.

Thick metal panels were bolted to the sides of the fishing boat and heavily suntanned men were crammed inside. They held old rifles and submachine guns with an extra coat of paint to hide the scrapes and to stop them from rusting. Those tools were clearly not needed for fishing.

They were pirates who had butted into the transmission to put the ship where they wanted. A suntanned man returned a small microphone to the radio hook and whistled at the feast before him.

"Okay! Our prey is extra special today!! It's got a giant antenna on top. That's a satellite connection. They use it to check the black cards used in the casino. There must be tons of rich people on there !"

As the first man gave them some motivation, the other pirates started to grow rowdy.

"Eh? I thought it was for Wall Street which is so popular lately. They need to mess with their stocks and exchanges while on their cruise."

"This is the Legitimacy Kingdom, so it would be the London Stock Exchange."

"Who cares as long as they're a bunch of rich ladies and gentlemen? More importantly, how are we on anti-ship missiles? We need at least two. The first acts as a demonstration. We need to make sure they know we'll sink them if they don't do what we say."

"Leave it to me. There are four of them hanging on the sides of the ship."

"You idiot!! Now I know why our fuel consumption's been so bad!!"

An amateur pirate group could never mass produce missiles that were a collection of cutting-edge military secrets.

But nothing said they had to be "cutting-edge".

What if they added modern technology to weapons produced fifty years prior?

Just as a hard disk sold in a home electronics store's clearance sale would have been highly classified government technology fifty years ago, amateur groups could manufacture weapons.

In the festivals of Southeast Asia, rockets measuring three to five meters long were created to launch exciting fireworks 5000 to 10,000 meters into the air. If they were laid on their side, they made a decent starting point for a rocket motor.

Meanwhile, the other pirate ships gathered.

The suntanned man grabbed the radio again.

"Okay. A through F, go in front of the luxury cruise ship! Scatter some mines to stop them. G through I, take the starboard side. J through L, use anti-ship missiles to surround them from behind."

"Shut up! You aren't the leader!!"

"Don't try to board the ship and earn some extra money just because it's full of rich people. The plan is to make them lower their rescue boats. You don't want to be killed by the peashooters they have for self-defense, do you?"

He heard a light noise.

One of his allies on the same boat was tapping the large radio.

And he whispered a question.

"Where do we fire the missile?"

"Don't use it like you're supposed to. If we sink the ship right off the bat, we can't take any hostages. Don't hit it on the waterline . Aim higher."

He pointed into the distance while still holding the radio's microphone.

As his finger jabbed toward the Scarlet Princess, it scooped upwards.

"For example, the control room."

A seven meter tube shot from the side of the fishing boat. The anti-ship missile used solid fuel (aka gunpowder) to fly diagonally up from the ocean surface. In this "improper" usage, it was directly targeting the ship's crew.

They all thought it was a success.

Blowing up the control room at the top of the luxury cruise ship would not immediately sink the ship. As previously stated, a ship' s weak point was the waterline where the seawater could surge in. However, the refined ladies and gentlemen would not realize that. If all of the professional crew was taken out at once and there was a fire on the ship, they would try to escape on the rescue boats no matter what. Afterwards, the pirates could surround the boats drifting powerlessly and carefully take hostages.

But…

The next thing the pirates knew, composite material shutters lowered over all of the luxury cruise ship's 1000 or more windows.

The shutters covered both the outside and inside of the bulletproof glass which was already over thirty centimeters thick. This was obviously out of place on a civilian ship.

(Huh?)

For an instant, a complete blank filled the suntanned man's mind.

The homemade anti-ship missile struck the control room, but its explosive flames and black smoke looked terribly unreliable. Once it all cleared away, only a slight dent remained in the shutters.

And then the ship began to fight back.

Strange metallic noises rang out again and again. From the bow to the stern, 20 mm Gatling guns of a close-in weapon system rose up along either side of the deck. They looked a bit like trees lining a road. The pools on the three layers of the deck split apart and 21 cm rapid-fire cannons rose high above them. The pirates could not see it, but a portion of the roof split into small sections like a chocolate bar or a honeycomb and countless vertical missile hatches opened in order.

They had stepped on a figurative landmine.

A horrible, horrible landmine.

Once they finally realized that, the captain of the luxury cruise ship spoke over the radio.

"Disguised Cruiser Scarlet Princess has confirmed an attack from the target."

He essentially gave a death sentence.

That order opened the gates of hell.

"Begin Operation Codename 'Blood-Soaked Princess'. Engaging target now. Pirates, this is your last chance to write your wills."

With those words, the wolf in sheep's clothing exposed its hidden claws and fangs.

After conceitedly thinking they could surround it with only about 15 boats, the pirates' luck had run out.

The foxhunt had begun.

Part 3

The two idiots named Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell were groaning in the landing unit hold at the bottom level of the disguised cruiser named Scarlet Princess.

The exterior was made to look like a luxury cruise ship, but the inside was completely different. Of its 380 meter length, over half of the bottom was a single large space. And that space was crammed full of military hovercrafts. Quenser and the others were packed like sardines into those hovercrafts.

The hovercrafts were pitched as "small but able to hold a tank", but they were far from comfortable for people to use. They reeked of machine oil.

"This is tyranny!! We were only riding along! Can you really throw us out in front of the pirate's guns? This isn't even the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's job! Who's going to pay us!?"

"This is probably how we're buying our ticket to ride the ship. I don't feel like doing any real work either, though."

"And how is this a 'disguised cruiser'? It's almost 400 meters long! They didn't make battleships this big even back when they were relevant. That's 100 meters more than the Island Nation's Yamato! Are they insane!?"

"The category of battleship has vanished, so what can you do? And it's a disguised ship, remember? Bringing escort ships along for protection would blow its cover, so it has to handle everything as a lone wolf. And it had to be heavily armored to safely draw in the pirates. It has to be tough enough to take a few rockets or torpedoes without issue."

History had proven that aircraft would overtake the battleship in usefulness, but battleships could be useful once more now that aircraft could not be sent out. They were perfect for luring out and slaughtering pirates.

"…Why are you breathing so heavily?"

"Eh? Doesn't seeing giant machines get you all excited? It's human nature."

Heivia shoved the perverted creep away with both hands as an ear-splitting buzzer rang and the lights switched to red.

Someone they could not see gave a high-spirited shout.

"Our brave 'waitresses', it's time you risked your life fishing for sharks! Let's make this an exciting enough battle to get a movie made! Rock & roll!!"

"Shut up! We've been ready!! And if you want to be the lead that badly, go do it on your own! Be a one-man army! Don't drag us into it!!"

Heivia demonstrated his grace as a noble by elegantly raising his middle finger as he shouted at the man, but that changed nothing.

With a heavy rumble, the wall in front of them opened to either side. The bow of the disguised cruiser opened like a castle gate. One after another, amphibious hovercraft slid out and into the gunfire-filled battlefield of the Strait of Malacca.

And…

Whether by coincidence or design, a rocket suddenly flew into the hold.

As Heivia frantically held down Quenser's head and got on the ground himself, a tremendous shock wave spread through the enclosed space.

A dull pain exploded more in his chest than his eardrums.

"Gbh!? Cough!! H-how the hell is this a safe and simple mop up mission!!"

"Anytime they call the mission 'simple', you should be suspicious."

"Wait… Wait a second!! Did this hovercraft just start sliding? Wait!! We've got a bunch of injured soldiers already! You can't just throw us out on the front liiiiiiiiiiiiiiiine!!"

But his protests came too late.

The hovercraft slid down the slope and shot out the bow of the "Blood-Soaked Princess". They were suddenly forced to clash with the small fishing boats (which had been modified into high-speed boats) sitting in front.

They were about sixty centimeters away from the closest boat.

They were close enough to jump from one boat to the other.

Heivia's gaze met that of a suntanned man.

"You bastards!!"

The man tried to raise the rifle carried over his shoulder with a sling belt, but he was too slow. Heivia pulled his handgun from its holster and fired repeatedly.

Quenser finally came to his senses as he watched three dark red holes appear in the man's chest.

"Stop, Heivia! You can't kill them!!"

"Ah? What!? I can't hear you over all the noise!!"

"Don't kill them!!"

All the 20 mm Gatling guns on the side of the disguised cruiser's deck began to fire and shot down a homemade anti-ship missile flying over Quenser's head. In return, several vertical launch missiles were fired at the pirates' fishing boats. The noisy sound of rotors came from the heliport and a military attack helicopter began to take off.

The pirates had formed a half circle to envelop the Scarlet Princess's path, but that proved a suicidal formation due to their misjudgment of the ship's firepower. There had supposedly been around fifteen pirate boats, but half of them had already been sunk .

Everything was in motion and just watching it all made one's eyes and head hurt.

And on top of that, the environment was so poor that one would be deafened while just sitting there.

After Quenser's group's hovercraft moved away, an attack from the air blew away the previous high-speed pirate boat like an empty can.

With his ears still ringing, Quenser shouted toward Heivia who was right next to him.

"If we just had to kill them, the ship's weaponry could handle it ! We were sent out for a reason!! Weren't you listening during the pre-mission briefing!?"

"Oh? Oh, oh! Did they say something about that!?"

"They're using fishing boats rather than used patrol boats so they can ditch their weapons in the sea and act like innocent fishermen if they have to! If we just kill them all, we'll be suspected of slaughtering civilians. That's why we need to capture a few of them alive and have them admit to being pirates. That's what we were told!!"

"In other words, they've knocked down a hornet's nest with a stone and now we have to retrieve it barehanded!? Goddamn this is a terrible job!! We're at least getting paid extra for this, right!?"

Nothing the pirates did could turn the situation around.

Sounds of gunfire and explosions continued without end.

The ship's rapid-fire cannons and the attack helicopter's rockets were unilaterally blowing away the pirates' boats.

"Two more! Our side just took out another two boats. Shit. If we don't capture a pirate soon, they'll all be dead!!"

"Shut up!! If you care that badly, jump over to that fishing boat and grab one yourself!!"

Only a few of the 10 meter high-speed pirate boats remained. The Scarlet Princess was fully equipped with the Legitimacy Kingdom navy's best, so it was a 400 meter mass of giant guns. There was no chance of it being sunk now.

But there was a chance of the pirates fighting back in some way.

The fishing boats were equipped with homemade anti-ship missiles. They would be able to blow away at least one of the hovercrafts that used the power of air to float.

"This is way too scary!! A missile just shot by right above us!! What happened to the close-in weapon system support!?"

"Are these the type that react to magnetism to detonate? This thing's hull is made of layered plastic and the balloon is made of synthetic fiber, so they might just slip past us."

"Dammit. Of course the Gatling guns on the side deck wait until *now* to turn this way. …Hm? This way!?"

"G-get down!! And turn the hovercraft to the side! Our own side's barrage is gonna fill us with holes!!"

The gunfire sounded like a broken buzzer as the line of CIWS weapons targeted an anti-ship missile flying a few meters above the ocean surface and scattered giant bullets at a rate of 5000 a minute. They were 20mm bullets which were masses of metal the size of a thumb. They were much larger than the standard used with anti-materiel rifles and even a single one grazing you could blow off a limb.

"They have to do all that just to shoot down a single missile. An Object's laser beams are an entirely different story, but this says a lot about the balance between offense and defense."

"Why are you starting that creepy breathing again!? Don't get your design-obsessed blood pumping like it's some instinct to preserve your genes in a life-threatening situation!!"

"Eh? I don't mix my love of machines with lust. Making anthropomorphized girls out of weapons is kind of disturbing if you think about it."

"Just think of it as adding on elements!! Don't think of it as surgically cutting and pasting things!!"

The hovercraft ridden by the two idiots and 28 others had three engines resembling two meter ventilators on the back. One of them was sending out disconcerting black smoke (due to the barrage from their side's close-in weapon system).

"How about we say the pirates did that and put in for injury pay? I think we deserve a bonus."

"If we do that, it'll mean we were injured by a group of amateurs. That would be a dishonor."

Meanwhile, the battle was almost over.

The attack helicopter that had been sent out partway through was doing too good a job. It was sending down a storm of rockets which were enveloping the small fishing boats and the surrounding ocean in flames.

"Isn't this pretty bad?" muttered Quenser as he carelessly looked up into the blue sky. "All of the pirate boats will be sunk soon."

"What happened to capturing some alive!? If we don't have one to say he's a pirate, we'll be accused of slaughtering civilians!!"

The two idiots looked around, but they saw nothing but eerie black smoke and wreckage starting to sink. It no longer felt like they were fighting. It was more like a treasure hunt.

"There!! There's another fishing boat behind that smoke. If we miss that one, we'll have to give up on catching anyone alive!! We' ll be mercilessly accused by a grinning international committee!!"

The attack helicopter flew by over their heads. It was clearly moving toward the same target.

Heivia brought a hand to his forehead.

"Is that pilot a coward!? I don't think he can relax until he eliminates every threat he sees. And it's not like those pirates can shoot down a helicopter flying around at high speed!!"

"What do we do? If we don't take one alive, we'll have to try our hand at necromancy during the court martial."

"I've had enough of this!!" shouted Heivia in desperation as he shouted at the young soldier in charge of steering the hovercraft. " Head full speed toward the fishing boat! …I can't believe I have to put my life on the line to protect the enemy!!"

"But what exactly are we going to do!?"

"We only have one choice."

For some reason, Heivia removed the safety pin from the shoulder-fired missile launcher hanging from his shoulder along with his rifle. He rested one end on his shoulder and aimed the other end. Tanks on land, small patrol boats at sea, and ground attack craft in the air. Save for its ridiculous price tag, that missile was known as a masterpiece.

"We fire on our own helicopter."

He did not hesitate.

He captured the target with both infrared and ultraviolet at the same time and he pulled the trigger.

The long, narrow missile shot out like a spear and shot by right next to the helicopter.

No damage was done.

Except for Quenser who was knocked backwards by the backfire.

He flew two or three meters like an unnamed character in a kung fu movie.

"Hot!! Hot!? Wh-what just happened? Are we under attack!?"

"If you're that lively, I'm not gonna worry too much."

The other soldiers on the hovercraft focused on Heivia. Their gazes were asking why he had fired on an ally.

"If I had actually aimed, it wouldn't be in the air right now! I purposefully missed. But that coward of a pilot won't notice that!! If you don't want to die, get ready!!"

The attack helicopter belatedly took evasive actions and then took a tight turn around. It was clearly being wary. If the pilot panicked, there was a chance he would simply attack. It was similar to an extremely sleepy soldier caught in a whirl of gunfire confusing which side was his allies.

Heivia shouted in desperation.

"I bought us some time, but it's only a dozen or so seconds! Charge straight into the fishing boat!! We just have to take at least one of them alive!!"

The hovercraft moved straight toward the lone remaining fishing boat. Meanwhile, Heivia aimed his assault rifle into the air and fired a long spray of bullets toward their attack helicopter. Orange sparks covered a side of the helicopter.

"With proper equipment, it can deflect rifle bullets." While firing tons of wasted bullets, Heivia gave a thin smile. "But that coward won't know that. His desire to survive made him panic and forget the plan. He'll actually try to avoid this peashooter."

The hovercraft approached the modified fishing boat from the side.

More accurately, it crashed into it.

Hovercrafts floated above the ocean surface with the power of air. The skirt portion that contained the air was a giant balloon made of bulletproof and knife resistant synthetic fiber.

Rather than a straight collision, the hovercraft climbed on top of the boat.

And the pirate man standing on the boat's deck was knocked into the ocean.

The fact that the skirt portion was a soft balloon turned out to be a stroke of luck for both sides. As the man flailed his limbs around, he was knocked several meters horizontally like a small stone.

At the same time, a rocket fell from the heavens and struck the point of intersection between the fishing boat and the hovercraft.

The blast knocked the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers into the air.

But it did not knock the will to fight from them. Or rather, they could not leave this sea of flames and smoke until they completed this. Several soldiers used strange wrestling moves to jump on the pirate who had fallen into the ocean.

Several dull sounds could be heard.

The pirate struggled as his head was forced under the salty ocean water.

Quenser and Heivia grabbed the pirate by the collar and dragged his head back above the surface.

And they shouted angrily into his ear.

"If you don't want us to start an interrogation using the water here, then start talking!! Tell everyone that you're a piece of shit pirate who was causing everyone all sorts of trouble!!"

Part 4

They were forced to participate in a "detour" to eliminate pirates, but Quenser, Heivia, and the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's original destination lay elsewhere.

Those idiots had been sent to the Strait of Malacca ahead of the rest of the battalion. Sea mines, fuel oil attacks, nets in the propeller, and pirates were all threats that even civilians could accomplish. To ensure that none of the warships were damaged, all those threats had to be eliminated before the maintenance battalion's fleet passed through.

In other words, their target this time was dangerous enough to warrant that.

Even in an age where Object vs. Object battles decided everything, they did not want to lose the backing of a single support ship.

"We're really here."

Their destination was the birthplace of Objects in the seas of the Far East.

It was currently a portion of the Capitalist Corporations and it was an important point for the Asian naval forces.

"This is the Island Nation. Should we really be here? This supposedly the artisan paradise that sent out the world's first Object and it's also known for its healthy food. A ridiculously proportioned macho man isn't going to attack us with all sorts of strange new weapons, is he?"

Quenser sounded bored as he stood on the deck of a small aircraft carrier. Rather than the takeoff and landing of aircraft, it was primarily used as maintenance space for the Object contained between it and another aircraft carrier.

The princess must have had nothing to do because she was sitting on the edge of the deck and looking blankly in Quenser's direction.

"Frolaytia said our job isn't very dangerous this time."

"She may be skilled, but you can't trust any verbal promises she makes. Especially when we're talking about the Island Nation. It may be part of the Capitalist Corporations, but the level of their newly developed technology is ridiculous. In fact, it's gone so far that it's created a kind of Galapagos Syndrome. Naturally, the same goes for their Objects."

"This will not be a direct fight in the first place."

"Yeah, they are going through some infighting, aren't they?" Quenser let out a light breath. "The Capitalist Corporations were crazy enough to go fully down the PMC route and make listed companies out of their army, but the intensification of conflicts in recent years means the armies sent around the world by the different major companies aren't enough. That's why they created the new framework of half-public self-defense PMCs to quickly strengthen their naval defenses."

"But one of those self-defense PMCs went out of control and started a civil war in the ocean around the Island Nation."

"What did they think would happen when they gathered tens of thousands of rotten soldiers given dishonorable discharges in different parts of the world and then handed them cutting-edge weaponry? Yet they let their guard down so much that they surrendered an Object to them. What's wrong with them? Were they *trying* to get themselves killed?"

"They had an aging society, so they had no choice. They had no young people."

"I know they were shorthanded, but how could they possibly think people coming in to earn some money would defend their nation to the bitter end?"

The strategic simulations of the Legitimacy Kingdom military predicted that the civil war would not last long. The self-defense PMC could not be taken lightly, but they were only borrowing the

Objects and other weapons and they could not maintain them or produce more on their own. And it was unlikely anyone would provide them with further supplies. The instant they ran out of reserves was the instant they met their end.

The simulations said they would last at most two months and possibly only a few weeks. But during that time, the Island Nation's defenses would certainly be lacking. It was possible the confusion could be used to attack in otherwise impossible places or ways.

The princess pouted her lips.

"Why do we have to interfere with the Capitalist Corporations' fight? We should just let them go at it."

"We don't want them having a nice fistfight by the river and getting along again. That's why we need to stab them in the side and make sure they can never join back up. If we kill what enemies we can while we have the chance, we don't have to worry about carelessly running into them on some other battlefield."

At that point, a radio transmission reached the entire battalion.

It was from Frolaytia, their local commander.

"It's time for the pre-mission briefing on how we will split the Island Nation. Gather in your ship's conference room. I will provide the explanation via the monitor. …Also, a special message for the idiots who were playing basketball on the flight deck. The one who dropped the ball in the ocean must take responsibility by

jumping from the cliff and retrieving it. That is government property. You aren't allowed to lose it. That is all."

Part 5

"As you can see, the ocean around the Island Nation is in a state of civil war. We will use the confusion to move in deeper than their normal defenses would allow. Our mission is to scout out their forces and destroy what we can."

Frolaytia spoke from the podium up front while a few arrows were added to the sea chart displayed on the screen.

"The biggest problem for the self-defense PMC is the supply line. According to the strategic simulation performed on our supercomputer, this civil war will run out of gas and reach a quick end. The major corporation controlling the Island Nation will likely carry out a sabotage operation to hurry that along."

The screen showed a group of islands in the ocean south of the Island Nation. One of those islands had not originally been there. It was a manmade floating island. The industrially manufactured island could move on its own and it was created by combining giant floats.

Its center was a dodecagon and each vertex had a harbor dock extending out from it like a tree branch.

Its overall silhouette looked like the ship's wheel used to turn the rudder.

"This is the artificial floating island Ame-no-Darin. It is made to extract resources from the ocean floor. It is the cornerstone of the self-defense PMC's supplies and reserves. It was the discovery of oil and veins of iron ore in the deep Pacific that transformed the Island Nation into a top class resource superpower. Thanks to that, they've left behind an environment that's covered in oil. Anyway, as long as they have this, the self-defense PMC will have plenty of ammunition and fuel. And by exchanging that for foreign currency , they can smuggle in food. This is the central pillar of this war."

Frolaytia used her penlight laser pointer to indicate different points on the displayed document.

"It originally functioned as the Island Nation's military reserves base. It was a treasure trove of fuel and ammunition and its security was left to the self-defense PMC in question as far back as the construction phase. Once the civil war began, they took full control of the Ame-no-Darin. With the standard reserves, they can fight for ninety days. With full use of its ocean floor resource extraction and refinement ability, they can create an endless supply of fuel and ammunition. It may be an expensive facility, but that expense paid for some nice features."

"I have a question." Quenser raised his hand. "Are we going to destroy that Ame-no-Darin? How does that benefit us?"

"An excellent question, student. But wait until I'm finished." Frolaytia placed her long, narrow kiseru in her mouth. "Our mission is to sweep for mines in the ocean around the Ame-no-Darin and to physically remove the saboteurs thought to have infiltrated it. We intercepted the schedule for a large-scale

sabotage operation and we plan to end it before it starts. Simply put, we will be protecting the Ame-no-Darin despite no one asking us to. After all, that will cause this war to drag on and cause great financial losses for the Island Nation. Any objections?"

It was a cruel plan, but they were at war and had no interest in benevolence or world peace. The Island Nation was categorized as a safe country, so they could not directly attack it or slaughter the non-combatants there, but they had no real reason to bring the civil war to a quick end or to protect the Island Nation's mobile fleet which included an Object. If they did, the forces remaining at the end of the civil war would turn toward them.

A small hand then rose into the air.

It was the princess's.

"Then who will I fight?"

"Did you think it would be the Object belonging to the isolated self-defense PMC? Well, it isn't. You will be fighting the Object belonging to the Island Nation's major corporation which has the overwhelming advantage. When we have a chance to freely defeat an enemy, it's always best to choose the strongest one. We will extend this civil war and take the initiative in removing future rivals. Do you all understand now?"

They were fighting to protect their enemy.

They were fighting to help out the isolated underdog.

Phrasing it like that made them sound like a gunman from a Western, but the principles at the core has been twisted by the world which had shattered like stained glass.

"Then let's begin. We are only here to benefit the Legitimacy Kingdom. Justice for the Capitalist Corporations is not our concern . How about you head out there and see what your precious Island Nation is really like."

Part 6

The two idiots named Quenser and Heivia were crammed into submarine torpedo tubes along with the other soldiers. It was one to a tube and they felt as small as coffins. The diving suits and oxygen tanks only made it feel more cramped.

"What is wrong with them? This is discrimination!! I'm a radar analyst. I shouldn't be launched from a torpedo tube while holding an oxygen tank and an underwater gun! I don't remember the contract I signed saying anything about doing this!"

"Shut up, Heivia. Sound is everything for subs. Make too much noise and the enemy will notice us."

"Fine by me! I'll make them wrinkle their nose at the most tremendous fart they've ever heard!!"

"You're in an enclosed space, so you'll just end up cursing your own asshole."

As they chatted over the radio, Quenser's coffin filled with red light. The torpedo tube was about to open.

The greeting from the weapons officer reached his ears.

"Carefree little birds, you have the precious free will of a human, so you can shit yourself if you want, but wait until you've left the sub first. Rock & roll!"

"Goddammit. Should I have brought an alarm clock along to set off after I left!? Well!?"

Heivia's complaints were immediately followed by the external door opening and seawater rushing into the torpedo tube. Quenser did not fight the current and waited until the tube was filled with water before he slowly left the submarine.

"There's nothing but sludge and oil around here. I'd heard ocean oil drilling always let some oil leak out, but this is crazy. You could set the ocean ablaze with a burner."

"When you weigh ecology against resources, people tend to choose the more profitable one. Not that it matters to us."

"What's that giant mass over there? A new type of mutant?"

"It's a clump of oil. It's just like running into sewage. You can't move once it gets all around you."

Quenser, Heivia, and eight other soldiers travelled through the dark ocean using devices resembling kickboards with motors

attached. They were on their way to the Ame-no-Darin, but doing so was not easy when the area was in a state of civil war.

Several vague silhouettes measuring a few meters across came into view.

As they came into focus, Quenser felt a chill run down his back. Long narrow cylinders which appeared to be torpedoes were stabbed into the clump of oil.

"Those are the Capitalist Corporations' smart torpedoes," said Heivia calmly. "I don't know which side of the civil war fired them , though."

"W-wait. Are we going to pass by them? If they detonate, we'll be torn to pieces."

"I said they were 'smart', remember? They only react to the acoustic signature of enemy ships that are updated over their network. They aren't made to kill humans."

"Really?"

"They cost 20 thousand dollars apiece. They'd lose a ton of money if a fish swimming by could detonate them. They're made to only react to top priority targets."

"But these didn't go off! We can't trust them."

Heivia went ahead as a guide and Quenser nervously followed while weaving between the smart torpedoes.

But that was when something approached while producing a rumbling vibration that sounded like a coin laundry amplified several times.

A giant mass slowly passed by the two idiots.

It was a submarine.

Quenser's eyes opened wide.

"You've gotta be kidding me!! We're swimming between unexploded torpedoes right this very instant! If they react to that acoustic signature, we'll be blown away!"

"We have a bigger problem!! I don't know whose sub that is, but the current created by its propeller is going to carry us off!! If we don't grab onto something, it'll suck us in and slice us to pieces !!"

"What am I supposed to grab onto!?"

The sensation of something tugging at his body created an instinctual fear in Quenser, so he immediately reached for the closest object.

It was one of the torpedoes sticking out of the oil.

"Kyaaaaah!!!!!"

Any kind of tactical thoughts were sent to the farthest reaches of the universe as he entrusted himself to what looked like a propane tank and prayed it would not explode.

"This is it! I'm gonna piss myself! I really am this time!!"

"Shut up!! That's no different form peeing in the pool! Stop making such a racket!!"

"How about you try it! It'll just fill your diving suit and there'll be no escape from that hell of your own creation. I don't want the kind of embarrassment that leads to suicide!!"

Those boys were from the nation of kings and knights, but they were desperate to protect their pride on an elementary school level .

An unpleasant noise rang out.

"What now!?"

"The sub ran into the clump of oil! It's coming this way!"

The back of the giant sub swung around like a bat and the propeller passed right by them like a lawnmower.

"Shit that was close. I don't know whose sub that is, but any closer and it would've wiped all of us out."

"Shouldn't we help it?"

"How? And whichever side it's on, it's an enemy."

Quenser's entire body was covered with an uncomfortable sweat, but annoyingly enough, he could not wipe it away. He, Heivia, and the other soldiers moved carefully to the side of the oil clump and met up with the units that left a different submarine.

Ultimately, a group of around one hundred Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were swimming toward the Ame-no-Darin.

"Is that it? It's incredible that something so gigantic can float."

"That just shows how reckless they've been. That's gotta be the king of pollution around here. In an American comic, it'd be the villain's secret base."

As they looked up at the Ame-no-Darin from below, it looked like a never-ending ceiling. They had needed to travel directly below the floating island to sneak in, but having the surface sealed off made the ocean seem all the more oppressive. If their oxygen tank malfunctioned, there was no escape. It would mean certain death.

"Let's go. Our way in is the emergency drain pumps used in case of flooding. They aren't normally active, so we can make our way up into the float."

"If they notice us, it's all over. One flip of a switch and seven tons of seawater will be ejected every second. We'd learn what a bug in a drain feels like."

After using their tools to destroy a few sensors and remove the wire mesh cover, they entered the drain pump pipe one at a time. The pipe was over two meters across, so they had plenty of room to move.

After working their way into the Ame-no-Darin's spare engine area, they could finally remove their diving suits and heavy oxygen tanks.

"Hey, where'd our commander go?" asked Heivia in annoyance . "We can't start without him."

"It looks like we got separated somewhere," answered a nearby female soldier. "He isn't responding over the radio, so should we wait until he catches up?"

"No, thanks! He's the one who got all worked up on the Scarlet Princess, wasn't he? I'm not going to get myself killed for him. A group of one hundred can't hide forever. If they throw a bomb in while we're waiting for that jokester, we'll all be taken out."

"Um, Heivia? This is enemy territory, so wouldn't it be bad if our commander was captured?"

"If his allies can't find him, how is the enemy supposed to? And aren't the rest of you pissed at him, too? Teacher won't get mad, so be honest and raise your hands."

None of the honor students raised their hands, so Heivia changed the question.

"Do you want to die for the kind of commander who returns to the sub without telling us, or do you want to continue the mission and get back alive? Raise your hands if you want to survive."

All of the idiots raised their hands.

Their plan was decided.

The Ame-no-Darin was a float the size of a fair-sized island, but it was still an indoor facility. A group of one hundred travelling together would be too large for the passageways, so it would be more effective to split into groups of ten and travel down different routes to target the enemy from multiple angles.

And so it was time to split into groups.

Quenser raised his hand.

"I'm willing to follow a guide, but who takes the lead?"

"That's decided by rank."

Heivia's offhand comment turned everyone's focus on a new second lieutenant, but he trembled, shook his head, and grew pale.

"I don't think that's going to happen," said a female soldier in irritation.

"Then let's go with experience and achievements."

Heivia's new suggestion turned the focus to the two idiots.

Needless to say, no one could outdo their achievements of destroying several Objects on their own. It was just that their negative achievements were also quite amazing, so it all cancelled out in the end.

"Seriously?"

"If we keep complaining, the enemy will spot us and get in the first attack. Let's get moving."

And that settled that.

The other ten-man groups determined their leaders based on the number of battles they had fought in and they all began to move.

"We have no guarantee we'll come back here and who knows when we'll need to jump in the ocean. It'll be a bit of a burden, but we need to carry the diving suits and oxygen tanks with us."

"Where will the enemy come from? Specifically, the saboteurs who are destroying the Ame-no-Darin to cut off the self-defense PMC's supply line."

"They're boldly making their way in using transport helicopters with spoofed identifiers. They should be arriving any time now, so let's head toward the heliport. We'll probably run across them on our way there."

"Quick question. How do we tell the saboteurs from the self-defense PMC protecting the Ame-no-Darin? They should both be using Capitalist Corporations Island Nation equipment."

"Do we even need to? They're both enemies."

Part 7

The Baby Magnum was released into the ocean near the southern islands after its naval floats were attached.

The old maintenance woman was waiting atop the flight deck of a small aircraft carrier in a large-scale fleet. Her job was to quickly and accurately maintain and repair the Baby Magnum upon its return, but the situation was different this time.

Her name was Ayami Cherryblossom.

As her family name suggested, she was originally from the Capitalist Corporations Island Nation. She had worked as a technician before leaving, so she had been recruited for an investigation of the abilities of the Island Nation's Objects.

Her B5-sized tablet computer displayed satellite images and video taken by front line observers and she conversed with the Baby Magnums' princess over her headset.

"There they are. We've picked up two Objects near the Ame-no-Darin. One is a first generation named Yuuhi which was officially deployed by the Island Nation to quickly end the civil war. I believe the Legitimacy Kingdom's codename for it is Be Ablaze. It can literally set the sea on fire."

"It's a first generation?"

【ビーアブレイズ】
BE ABLAZE

全長…85メートル

最高速度…時速650キロ
(左右への側面回避挙動を得意とする。前進だと半分程度)

装甲…5センチ×200層(溶接など不純物含む)

用途…水陸両用第一世代

分類…戦略防衛兵器

運用者…『資本企業』の『島国』

仕様…エアクッション

主砲…コイルガン+レールガンの多段式加速砲

副砲…レーザービーム、連速ビーム砲、火炎放射器など

コードネーム…ビーアブレイズ
(近接防御システム『火遁の衣』によって戦場を火の海に変える事から。なお、『資本企業』の正式名称は『ゆうひ』)

メインカラーリング…赤銅色

BE ABLAZE

"That's thanks to a sad mentality of the Island Nation. They're better at creating improved versions of old weapons than they are developing brand new ones. For example, they add cameras to outdated fighters and insist on using them as spy planes. This one may be classified as first generation, but its insides have been completely swapped out so it can keep up with modern models. Underestimate it, and you'll end up on the ocean floor."

"But its main weapon is a flamethrower, right? I don't see how that's a threat to Objects that can withstand nuclear weapons."

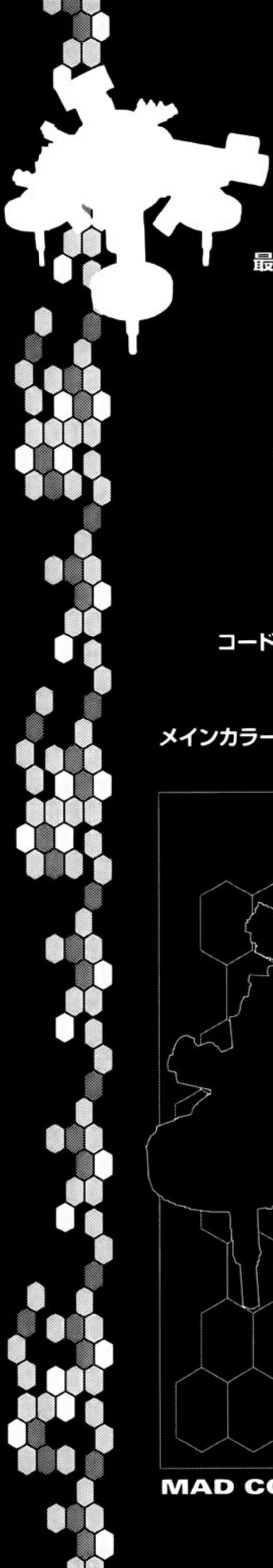
"It's a close range defensive weapon known as the Hiding Clothes of Flame. It scatters fuel oil and napalm over the entire area and sets the sea ablaze. This is an effective anti-personnel weapon, but it's mostly meant to disrupt targeting information with smoke and mirages. You should assume your laser targeting won't work. You will be separated by several layers of mirages created from temperature change, so the light will bend all over the place."

However, the ocean around the Island Nation was in state of civil war and the two forces were fighting each other.

The princess was targeting only one side and destroying the Be Ablaze was her top priority, but the situation was too complex for her to focus solely on that. Another giant enemy existed in that ocean.

Namely, the self-defense PMC's Object that used the Ame-no-Darin as its supply base.

It was a symbol of rebellion.



【マッドクッカー】
MAD COCKER

全長…75メートル

最高速度…時速580キロ

装甲…2.5センチ×400層(溶接など不純物含む)

用途…海戦専用第一世代

分類…海洋長距離侵攻用兵器

運用者…自防PMC

仕様…静電気式推進+海戦用フロート

主砲…ソルトレールガン

副砲…レーザービーム、下位安定式プラズマ砲など

コードネーム…マッドクッカー
(塩を利用した主砲システムを調理機材に見立てたもの。
『資本企業』の正式名称は『にんぎょ』)

メインカラーリング…白

MAD COCKER

"The other one is named Ningyo. The Legitimacy Kingdom's codename for it is Mad Cooker. It's a first generation equipped with a salt railgun. Naturally, it's been independently altered to have the power needed to defeat a second generation."

"A salt railgun?"

"They were mainstream before low-temperature superconductors were successfully used in weapons. It uses a liquid known as molten salt. When salt is heated to 1200 degrees and liquefied, it has ten times the conductivity of normal saltwater. That molten salt can be used to construct a cheap and primitive railgun."

An endless supply of the raw material was located in the ocean below it.

With its huge reactor, it could easily heat it.

The reason the Island Nation had continued research into the outdated salt railgun was likely because they wanted to use the ocean surrounding them to increase how long they could fight.

"The current version gives the shells conductivity by creating them from a base of over 90% salt. The core of the shell is a long, narrow spike of tungsten that they call the Ushi-no-Koku. It's made so the mass of salt shatters when it's fired. That sends all the kinetic energy into the tungsten so it can pierce the enemy's onion armor. Continuing to use the same method used by old tank guns is another example of the Island Nation's sad mentality."

As long as they had the technology to filter out and condense the iron and rare metals dissolved in the ocean, it was conceivable that the Object could fight indefinitely with no need to resupply. It was almost more dangerous from the experimental side than as an enemy.

"As I'm sure already know, your primary target is the Be Ablaze from the Island Nation's major corporation. To drag out this civil war and deplete them financially, we need to protect the weaker side, attack the stronger side, and bring both sides as close to equal as we can. But if we go too far, the two Capitalist Corporations Objects might work together to eliminate us. In other words, there is no need to defeat your target at all costs. Just fire at it from the distance and cause as much damage as you can while ensuring all three Objects need to keep an eye on the other two."

Modern wars were decided by the number of Objects.

With one-against-one, an Object would head in for a direct fight . With one-against-three, an Object would swiftly retreat before fighting.

With that in mind, it would cause incredible pressure to the Island Nation when a third Object of dubious affiliation entered the fray.

Normally, two Capitalist Corporations Objects would work together if the Legitimacy Kingdom attacked.

But they could not trust each other during a civil war.

If they joined together and the other betrayed, a one-against-two battle would be unavoidable.

That fear would bind the battlefield.

"Understood," said the princess. "I will stick with long-range shots from ten kilometers away."

"We don't need to settle this or even see it through to the end. As long as we put an end to the large-scale Ame-no-Darin sabotage plan, we can retreat and watch the mayhem from a safe distance. If the civil war continues, it will do critical damage on an economical front. This has been an internal problem for the Capitalist Corporations from the beginning, so it isn't worth it for us to risk our lives here."

Part 8

The major Island Nation corporation plan to sink the Ame-no-Darin was to send a large number of saboteurs into the facility while a large-scale battle between Objects acted as a diversion.

The plan was only being carried out after a thorough preparatory period and a similar plan could not simply be repeated again and again.

In other words, stopping them just once would eliminate this opportunity to destroy the Ame-no-Darin.

The civil war would drag on and the Legitimacy Kingdom's objective would be achieved.

While occasionally speaking with the other groups over the radio, Quenser, Heivia, and eight others cautiously advanced.

"Hey, there's an elevator over here."

"I dare you to get on that thing. The instant the door opens, you 'll be riddled with holes. You can't escape from a square box. Let's just use the stairs."

The Capitalist Corporations saboteurs had apparently arrived through the heliport by tricking the Ame-no-Darin with spoofed identifiers. Quenser's group had started at the bottom and was ascending to the heliport. They assumed they would run into the saboteurs somewhere along the way.

There were apparently three floors' worth of height from the bottom of the Ame-no-Darin to the ocean surface.

"Y'know, I'd heard they were a technological superpower, but this place is almost falling apart. Wall and ceiling panels are removed and the plumbing is exposed at points. Did they run out of funding halfway through building the thing?"

"Quenser, I want to make sure I'm not seeing things. What is that you've been pointing all over the place?"

"A digital camera. Why?"

"We're in the middle of a mission to kill people!"

"And I can't stand just going along empty-handed!! I have to take back at least one piece of Island Nation tech!!"

As they chatted, they made their way toward the stairs.

The stairway appeared to be for emergency use. Once they passed through the door, they found concrete stairs that reversed direction countless times.

They had to send someone ahead to make sure they were not completely wiped out in a surprise attack.

Heivia gave a sign with his fingers, his allies gave a different sign back, they began a war of gestures, and they ultimately played rock-paper-scissors.

After playing scissors, a trembling Heivia was thrust toward the staircase by his fellow soldiers.

"If this was chess, you'd be sending your king right to the enemy."

"I don't want to take responsibility for anything, so I'm fine being a pawn."

The fluorescent lights flickered.

Quenser and four others acted as the scouts. Heivia held out his assault rifle to see up through the gap in the center of the staircase that formed a rectangle as it repeatedly doubled back.

"A cramped staircase is the worst."

"Why?"

"Try to think before you speak. It's not as bad as an elevator, but they can set all sorts of ambushes."

An instant later, gunfire assaulted them in the ideal way from the ideal spot.

"Gyaaah!!"

"Waaah!!"

The enemy fired down while leaning over the railing up above.

The five of them could only retreat while firing back. Quenser headed for the entrance they had come from while helping a nearby soldier who was holding a bloody shoulder and was about to collapse.

"Heivia, fall back! Fall back!! We'll be wiped out like this!!"

"Shut up! Why the hell do you think I'm trying to buy us some time!? You drag that injured soldier away!!"

"If they drop a grenade, it's all over!! We'll be slaughtered without a chance to buy any time!!"

That was when they heard a hard clanking noise.

The overhead attackers had tossed an explosive over the railing. The grenade struck the wall a few times and landed at their feet.

"…!!!???"

The enemy was playing it all by the book.

All five of them rushed toward the narrow entrance to the stairwell, but not many actually made it into the corridor beyond.

A muffled explosion burst out.

With his face dyed red with someone else's blood, Heivia pressed against the wall and shouted out.

"We have casualties!! Check the damage!!"

"Almost zero! The injured private covered the grenade with his own body!!"

"That idiot tried to take all the glory for himself!!"

"He placed his balled up diving suit over it, so I don't think he thought he would die."

"You don't have to point that out! We can just call it a valiant death!!"

At any rate, the blood-soaked Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers used the slight bit of time this gave them to return to the corridor where the other five awaited them.

The enemy must have dropped more grenades because multiple explosions reached their ears.

"This is bad, Quenser. The enemy is better than us. I only caught a glimpse of their uniforms, but assuming it isn't a bluff, they've sent in someone amazing."

"Eh? Does the Island Nation have any famous units?"

"They aren't from the Island Nation." Heivia wiped the blood from his face with an arm. "This is Moss Green co. ltd. They're a land war PMC from the Northern Restricted Zone where long, drawn out wars continue 365 days a year because Objects are forbidden. I heard they'd been expanding their business to naval operations, especially landing operations, so this might be a promotion for their new services."

"Meaning?"

"A soldier's quality is determined by the quality and quantity of daily training, but these ones are out in actual battles year round. People who rely on Objects like us don't stand a chance! The difference in experience is so overwhelming that we simply can't win!!"

Part 9

The longer one fought an unbeatable enemy, the greater one's losses would be.

Even a child could figure that out.

But they were not allowed to simply raise the white flag and go home.

"Let's escape to a more advantageous position. We can fire a bit, fall back a bit, and then repeat the process to wear down their numbers."

"How long do you think they'd keep falling for that obvious method? Moss Green is filled with nothing but cruel, cigar-smoking sergeants with eyepatches."

"Just start laying as many traps as you can along the way. If we can't win in a firefight, we need to wear down their numbers in other ways."

They had no time, but any immediately obvious traps would be meaningless.

Fortunately, some of the wall and ceiling panels of that floor were removed, exposing thick steel pipes travelling around like blood vessels. There were plenty of places to hide traps.

"Hey, are you just setting up the plastic explosives as is? Wouldn't you normally bury them in piles of screws or nails?"

"We don't have time and the shockwave will fill the corridor anyway. You can shoot them once they're knocked out, right? More importantly, gather all our cheap rockets. I don't have enough firepower with what I have on me. You'll be too afraid to use them in here anyway, so let me use the warheads for traps."

"What?"

"A warhead with a contact fuse can be used as a landmine. Let's hide them under the paper and mats lying around."

They added other embellishments to the bombs: a dangerous cleanser that expanded as a mist when heated combined with a bleaching agent that caused intense pain and inflammation when it contacted skin. They found both of them in the lockers along the corridor.

Ultimately, they laid around thirty traps.

"Will this really work? A fat old man working on his home on the weekends makes better-looking stuff than this."

"It's a tragedy you can't see the golden ratio to this. No matter where they try to evade, they'll trip a different trap. It's like a tangle of strings; they can't just untangle one string at a time. I should get a medal for making something so artistic on such short notice."

"You might find some fans in a prison. They'd probably all be skinny little guys, though."

Just as Quenser and the others turned around to head to their ambush point, they heard an explosion up ahead and a great impact hit them.

The corridor wall had been destroyed from the other side.

Gray dust filled the corridor and cut off their path.

"Goddammit!!" shouted Heivia from the ground. "What is with today!?"

"What? My ears are ringing and I can't hear you!?"

"Those Moss Green fuckers took a shortcut! Our escape route's been cut off, so we can only fall back. And that means going through the corridor we just filled with traps!!"

It seemed unlikely they were being monitored via cameras or sensors.

The enemy had simply used their intuition and experience to accurately predict their actions. And that enemy had cut them off on the worst route possible. That level of accuracy made them seem like espers.

Multiple sounds of gunfire reached Quenser's ears as they recovered.

He could no longer leisurely talk about thinking this through logically.

To escape the threat before his eyes, he charged into the spider web of traps he himself had laid.

The Moss Green soldiers peeking out from the hole in the wall were not courteous enough to aim for each soldier one at a time.

They accurately fired a bullet into a rocket warhead set up as a trap.

And an explosion swallowed up Quenser and the others.

Part 10

A woman named Angela Hibiscus commanded Moss Green and she frowned after hearing the explosion.

"What? They're still moving."

"They must have kept their traps non-lethal. Their own kindness saved them."

"Then go finish off the passed-out fools. Just as they planned to do to us."

A blond combat engineer twitching on the floor moved his hand. He grabbed some fishing line to set off his own trap.

As the corridor filled with a white mist, Angela's men spoke delightedly.

"Wow, a chemical weapon. They violated the war treaty, captain."

"Undiluted bleach, hm? You can have fun if you want, but do you have protective masks and suits prepared for us?"

"Eh? Well…"

"I don't recall supplying any. The air conditioning is blowing their suicidal smokescreen this way, so we need to fall back. If we

let something like this gave us any casualties, it would affect the unit's reputation. I don't want to owe the advertising firm a favor."

Meanwhile, Heivia was very nearly screaming after being thrown into the toxic smokescreen.

"Quenser, you idiot!! We already had a full course of hell lined up for us, so why did you have to order dessert!? What the hell is this? Cough, cough. Bleach!?"

"If you don't want to destroy your throat, stay quiet. And you have your diving suit's mask, remember? Your throat will hurt, but the mask will keep it below a lethal level!"

"You're kidding. So we have to crawl through this!?"

"They can easily get rid of this impromptu smokescreen with the air conditioning and then we'll need enough body bags for all of us. Would you rather stay here and end up filled with lead!?"

Either way, they could no longer return unscathed.

Quenser and the others put on their oxygen masks and continued through the corridor while experiencing some chemical inflammation. On the way, they set off even more of their non-lethal traps, but they finally arrived at the stairwell.

"N-now what do we do, you moron? They hold the area above the stairs. If we charge in, they'll just shoot us all. And if they sense any danger, they'll drop more grenades to finish us off."

"Heivia, do you have any rope? Can you rock climb?"

"Yes, but how does that help?"

"Then we don't even need these stairs," spat out Quenser as he pulled out his Hand Axe plastic explosive. "I'll blow them to smithereens. After blowing up the structure and their soldiers, there will be nothing but a vertical hole left. We climb that with rope."

"Are you serious? Even if they hold the area up there, that won't be all of them. They came from the heliport. The more we climb, the closer we are to the center of their forces. Climbing just means more of those monsters! Can't we just give up on the mission and escape from the sea down below?"

"If we did that, Frolaytia's fists would send us to heaven before long anyway. Plus, they've been able to predict our actions so far, so we need to think about this in reverse. We're below the waterline right now and no water came out when we blew up the pipes in the walls. They must be used with the emergency pumps in case of flooding. If we held the upper floors, how would you wipe out an enemy down below?"

"…You can't be serious."

"If they close all the waterproof bulkheads in one area, they can fill it with water. Instead of risking their own men in a firefight, they can wipe out their enemy with the turn of a valve. In a boring fight against weaklings, they'll definitely choose the easier method. I'd be surprised if they *didn't* flood the area."

"B-but! We have diving suits and oxygen tanks. Even if they filled a block with water, it wouldn't kill us."

"It would. I don't know how many tons of water would come rushing in per second, but it would definitely be a horrific deluge. We'd be swept on and on while being slammed along corridors and stairways. It would be like tying yourself to a car and being dragged through gravel. Our limbs would be torn off and the oxygen tanks would rupture."

"Ugh," groaned Heivia through his mask.

"It looked like they didn't expect the suicidal wall of bleach and their pride probably demands a flawless victory. But this is the moment when we can escape the cage of Moss Green's expectations. If we don't head up now, it will all be downhill. As soon as they decide which valve to open, we'll be swallowed up by the deluge and torn to pieces!"

Part 11

The 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's fleet remained on standby away from the battle. Frolaytia received various reports in the small aircraft carrier's mission command center. A controller's panicked voice reached her ears.

"Something is approaching the radar. It's very fast!! It's flying just off the ocean surface at around Mach 2. It might be a cruise missile or…no, it's an aircraft!!"

"On the same battlefield as three Objects!?"

Objects contained a reactor that produced near-limitless energy and they were covered with anti-air lasers, so the complex evasive actions of an ace pilot were meaningless. Lock, fire, destroy. That was the standard of the modern battlefield, but this enemy was easily ignoring it.

Frolaytia's eyes opened in surprise and the controller continued the report with a bewildered look.

"From its movements, it does not appear to be unmanned. The CIWS…had no effect! Here it comes!!"

"Dammit! All hands, brace yourself!!"

In that instant, the old maintenance woman was waiting on the flight deck in order to maintain or repair the Baby Magnum. From there, she saw a Capitalist Corporations' air superiority fighter pass less than a meter over the steel surface.

It was a fli-21T.

That was a modified version of the normal fli-20. Its development had been stopped just before mass production and deployment, and it was currently undergoing its final tests in the Northern Restricted Zone.

It was tilted ever-so-slightly, so the top of the craft was visible from the old woman's side.

The short girl in the cockpit wore an anti-G suit resembling an Elite's special suit. Blue paint on the right wing drew a girl's silhouette bearing a giant snow crystal on the back.

As the old woman saw the words "Ice Girl One", a rugby ball-like mass below the wing was released.

It was an anti-ship aerial bomb.

Normally, its weight and the potential energy of the fighter's altitude would break through the ship's armor before it detonated, but when released just above the flight deck, the rugby ball bounced off the armor rather than penetrating it.

The old woman made an immediate decision upon seeing the bomb bounce into the air.

She watched the 200 kilogram explosive that had been perfectly left in the air so that the blast and fragments would efficiently spread over a wide area.

(The enemy has no interest in the fighters stored in the metal belly of the ship. They're after the Object maintenance unit and its equipment. In other words, us!!)

"Jump into the water if you want to live!!"

She threw aside all her tools, turned around, and did not hesitate to jump from the nine meter height of the flight deck. She heard the tremendous explosion before hitting the water. The small island of steel behind her creaked ominously.

Her body produced a pillar of water as it vanished below the surface, but her head appeared soon thereafter.

She did not know how many of the maintenance soldiers had followed her.

"How...? How did it…get through the network of anti-air lasers ?" groaned a young maintenance soldier floating nearby.

The old woman clicked her tongue.

"The air isn't uniform. There are temperature differences, humidity differences, dust, dirt, and even salt content when over the ocean. The changes in those things will bend light just a bit. Mirages are the simplest example."

"But…But… You couldn't measure all that even with sensors."

"No, but an ace pilot from the Northern Restricted Zone can sniff it out on intuition alone! Who is that pilot? Her senses are equal to or even greater than a pilot Elite's!!"

Part 12

Placing even a single bomb was a risky process.

As Quenser attached the plastic explosive to the base of the stairs, Heivia and a few others fired their assault rifles up the stairs

. They were trying to hold the enemy back. By creating a barrage without even a gap to poke one's head out, the enemy could not throw down a grenade.

But it only lasted thirty seconds.

"Shit! Here comes a grenade!!"

"I'm done here!! Fall back!! Fall back!!"

Quenser, Heivia, and the others practically rolled back to the corridor.

A moment later, the first grenade exploded.

Quenser then placed his hand on his radio and detonated his Hand Axe plastic explosive.

Just like when a building was demolished, the spiraling staircase smoothly crumbled and almost seemed to sink down underground. A great cloud of dust surged out toward them, but the corridor was already much worse due to the bleach and cleanser.

However, a problem presented itself.

"What the hell!? The door's filled with rubble! We can't escape through here!!"

"Then we just have to destroy the wall and ceiling to widen the hole. Outta the way, everyone!!"

After destroying the wall and ceiling enough to widen the "gap ", they entered the vertical hole which had been a stairwell.

Several moaning and bloody figures were mixed in with the piles of rubble.

"Don't," said Heivia quickly.

Even so, one of the enemy soldiers pulled out a handgun despite being unable to stand.

After a few assault rifle shots, the groaning stopped.

Heivia clicked his tongue and spoke to Quenser.

"I've had enough of this. Let's climb on up."

They had no specialized device to fire a rope to the top, so they gathered a random weight from the bloody rubble at their feet. It was a fist-sized piece of concrete with twisted rebar sticking out of it in places. They tied one end of a rope to it, swung it around like a morning star, and tossed it straight up.

"Oh? Ah? What? I didn't get in on the first try."

"And now it's falling. Move!"

After the second and third try, they were shedding tears over how wonderful the helmets supplied by their fellow soldiers were. Finally, Heivia tossed the rope and felt it firmly stick. It seemed the

rebar sticking out from the concrete weight had caught on the remains of the staircase on the wall. And it had caught right next to the door on the upper floor.

Heivia put all his weight on it to thoroughly check it.

"If the enemy starts firing down while I'm climbing, there's nothing I can do, so make sure to cover for me."

"Then why don't you give me a gun? I'm confident I can at least fire right up your asshole."

With a parting raise of the middle finger, Heivia started climbing up the rope. Meanwhile, the other soldiers threw more ropes and secured a second and third route up.

Unsurprisingly, scrawny Quenser could not rock climb on his own, so the others had to pull him up last.

After exiting into the corridor, Quenser glanced at the sign on the wall.

It said 0m.

This floor had none of the pipes travelling around like blood vessels and the floor and walls were a shiny white. Nevertheless, some of the panels were still missing.

"It looks like we've made it above the waterline. They can't flood us now."

They were all battered and they had lost the soldier who had protected them from the grenade.

Their uniforms were covered in blood from god knows who, were ripped in places, and stank of chemicals.

"I get that they can't flood us, but what do we do now?"

"We can't just run. We have to wear down the numbers of those monsters from the Northern Restricted Zone. To ensure the civil war drags on and causes a great depression for the Island Nation's economy, we need to wear down the stronger side."

"I've had enough. We can't beat them. What do they eat anyway? Pure protein? Steroids?"

An Object had not even shown up and yet Heivia was already in full complaining mode, so the Moss Green PMC was clearly quite skilled.

Heivia contacted the other units by radio, but it seemed they had already received their baptism from Moss Green as well. None of them wanted a direct fight with them.

However, they could not leave enemy territory until someone produced some results.

That left deciding the loser by drawing lots.

"Moss Green will be heading down, right? That means we have to head down to fight them, but we'll be wiped out if they flood the area. What are we supposed to do?"

"I have an idea." Quenser sat with his back against the wall. " All the pumps here are electronic. The manual valves will only let a trickle out, so we don't have to worry about them."

"Are you saying we attack the power source? The Ame-no-Darin is shaped like a ship's wheel. In addition to the central power source, it has secondary power sources in each of the twelve spokes. Do you really think we can wander around such a huge facility and destroy all of them? If we could, we wouldn't be in so much trouble right now."

"We only need to take out one."

"They'll just switch to another power source."

"Normally, yes." Quenser grinned. "Think about the handheld game systems popular in the safe countries. They have two power sources: the AC plug and the DC battery. If you repeatedly insert and remove the plug a whole bunch, it can cause an error in the power source switching process and the entire system will die. But it might wipe out your save data, so I don't recommend trying it yourself."

"And you want to try that in a legit war?"

"There's no better answer for us right now. We want to stop them from sinking this thing and we want the war to continue, so we can't completely destroy their power source. If we did that, the war would be over."

Hearing that, Heivia glanced over at the other surviving soldiers.

None of them shouted support, but no one spoke up in protest either. They likely wanted the correct answer whatever it might be.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

"If no one has any other ideas, we'll have to go with that. If we hang around here, we'll just end up cornered. It's kill or be killed."

"Where's the closest power source?"

"The sixth secondary power supply is three hundred meters ahead."

After eating some tasteless soap-like rations and drinking from their water bottles, the group started walking toward the sixth secondary power supply with guns in hand once more.

Because they had risen above the waterline, one wall was covered in windows. The cold gray ocean spread out beyond the glass and what looked like an embankment was visible two or three kilometers away. That was likely one of the harbor blocks sticking out from the center just like the one they were on.

As soon as Quenser turned toward it, someone strongly grabbed his shoulders from behind.

Heivia tackled him to the shiny white floor and a high-pitched sound rang out a moment later.

At first, he did not know what had happened.

It was only when he heard the gunshot that he finally realized it was a sniper.

"Get down, you idiots! Get down!!"

As Heivia shouted, his follow soldiers frantically dove to the floor.

Quenser moved just his eyes to look at the window. It only contained a small hole and crack as if the tip of an umbrella had pierced it. The rifle bullet had been travelling so quickly that it had passed through the glass before the force of the impact could propagate.

"How did you notice that!?"

"My rifle's passive sensors just happened to pick something up. He's using microwaves that react to motion! It's a necessary item when doing long-distance sniping without a spotter!!"

A few of their allies held up their assault rifles while crouching down. They connected a line between the hole in the glass and the hole on the opposite wall and they followed that to determine where the sniper had fired from.

But Heivia spoke up from the floor.

"Don't try it. He'll have already moved and you couldn't reach him without anti-materiel rifles anyway. If he's using microwaves, he's the type that shoots and runs. If he's set the equipment somewhere else and is linked to it through his radio, that won't tell us anything either. If you pop up to fire back, he'll just shoot you from his next point!"

"How about we continue on along the floor?" asked Quenser. " If we stay below the windows, the walls will protect us."

"I'd love to, but do you have any guarantee he isn't using an anti-materiel rifle? And if he pulls out a missile or Gatling gun, he can rip us and the walls to pieces."

Part 13

It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

That was the honest opinion of the ace pilot girl of Sky Blue Inc., a Capitalist Corporations aerial PMC. She surrendered herself to the hard rock loudly playing from the smartphone she had brought into the cockpit.

The blue sky beyond the clear canopy was interrupted by several streams of black smoke, but the losses were not from her side. The Legitimacy Kingdom warships were being set ablaze one after another.

It would not have been this easy in the Northern Restricted Zone where she normally fought. The powerful long-time fighters of those never-ending death-filled battlefields did not rely on Objects. They would have seen right through this disturbance tactic and used manual targeting to swat down the bothersome flies. Destroying a heavy cruiser with just a handful of aircraft was worth a hero's medal, so the girl found it almost disturbing that they were about to reach double digits so easily.

(The company ordered me to score some points here, but I guess this is what it's like in the outside world. The only way to die on this battlefield is falling asleep because it's so boring.)

She gave instructions to her colleagues over the radio.

She could see their next target.

It was a small aircraft carrier used as a flagship. To distribute the risk, there were a few identical ships in the fleet, but the thickness of the defensive barrages made it immediately obvious which was the flagship.

"Ice Girl 1 to Ice Unit. On my signal, perform a unified attack on the aircraft carrier's bridge. Attack from the top to throw the bottom into chaos. And if I'm correct, that ship is connected to the Object. Hopefully the panic will spread to the star of the battlefield ."

The ship's Gatling gun close-in weapon system began firing once they arrived within 100 meters, but a few thousand shots a minute was not enough to eat into their fighters. The bullets

simply travelled across the ocean and tore into the neighboring ship.

Ice Girl 1 flew on through.

She even looked through the thick bulletproof glass and saw a silver-haired woman who appeared to be the commander. The woman was staring quietly at her.

But Ice Girl 1 did not care.

Her thumb gently stroked the button on top of the stick that fired a missile.

The pack of wolves would crush the head of the fattened herbivore.

But something happened just before that.

"CT to Ice Unit! Defense Charlie detected at nine o'clock. I repeat, an AAM Defense Charlie detected at nine o'clock!! Cancel it ASAP!!"

(…!?)

There had been no missile alert.

Or rather, there were so many meaningless targeting signals coming from the surrounding ships that she had not noticed this sudden intruder.

After Ice Girl 1 gave instructions to the others, they stopped attacking and took scattered evasive actions. The four fighters split into groups of two and flew past either side of the bridge at tremendous speed. The supposedly bulletproof windows shattered , but the aces did not have time to check on that.

"Ice Girl 1 to CT! Cancel confirmed! #4 was hit by some fragments, but it's still active!!"

"There was no targeting signal just before it fired. The enemy is likely using visual identification. It's using semi-active targeting and the pilot seems to be directly targeting you by sight!!"

In that instant, Ice Girl 1 felt a chill run along her spine.

It did not come from fear.

It did not come from unease.

It did not come from terror.

The vector of this emotion was in the exact opposite direction.

"Here it comes."

The girl named Mariydi Whitewitch smiled fiercely.

"Something's coming and it lives in the same world as us! Ice Unit, remember the real battlefield. The practice run ends here!!"

A moment later, someone sent out a transmission on an open and unencrypted band.

"Don't grin like that with a job this boring. I'm sure you're getting tired of tripping up those who have grown rusty thanks to the Objects. How about you let another ace pilot join you in this outdated sky, Ice Girl of the Capitalist Corporations."

The man's pretentious manner of speech reminded Ice Girl 1 of a certain fact.

The Legitimacy Kingdom had their own ace. While she and her colleagues stuffed everything necessary to fly into a human shell, this pilot flew a delta-wing fighter that looked like a beautiful sword and was created by removing all but the absolute necessities from the flying machine. He was a steel grim reaper who supposedly preferred using inconvenient semi-active targeting and would occasionally toy with the enemy fighters by " redoing the targeting" of missiles that flew off in the wrong direction.

When she recalled his name, she licked her lips.

"Burning Alpha. I never thought I would run across the Legitimacy Kingdom's scarlet evil eye!!"

"Stop it. That's embarrassing. Unlike you, I'm much too old for those childish nicknames. Now I'm just itching to shoot you down."

Even as they spoke, the fight to the death had already begun.

They weaved between the warships, chased and were pursued, and performed countless combat maneuvers as they attempted to take up position behind the other.

The line of ships momentarily got between them.

"By the way, hard rock during a dogfight? You have terrible taste. It's just too cliché. Did you get it from a Hollywood movie? Or maybe a video game? Just so you know, classic is best no matter what you're doing. You need to grow out of that childish stuff and maybe grow some breasts too."

"You might think you're being intellectual, but you're just polishing a fossil. I can't stand how the Legitimacy Kingdom thinks anything's good as long as it's old and musty. It's disgusting. You might as well be praising cheese that smells like wet socks."

"…"

"…"

Silence fell.

A slight gap in the line of ships appeared and the wall dividing the two fighter units disappeared.

The masses of metal crossed paths as they weaved through the slight gap.

The ace pilots began their battle as they worked to rule the sky.

Part 14

Angela Hibiscus, who commanded Moss Green, clicked her tongue when she received a report from the sniper.

"The lost children are after the sixth secondary power supply. Anything else would be sad even for them."

There were several secondary power supplies, so stopping just one or two would not affect the entire Ame-no-Darin. They were also located at the end of the structure, so causing an explosion with their fuel would not sink the Ame-no-Darin.

Which meant…

"They must be trying to interfere with the power supply's emergency switching system to cause an error in the whole power system and create a blackout. A foolish idea for a group of fools."

The civil war surrounding the Ame-no-Darin was being fought between two Capitalist Corporations forces. One was trying to protect the Ame-no-Darin and the other was trying to sink it.

Angela's Moss Green unit had been hired by the group trying to sink it.

"Sergeant major, how is the marking going?"

"It is already complete. Team C has secured the central power supply. We know the locations of all 2500+ valve release points, so we can begin the flooding at any time."

Moss Green was trying to sink the Ame-no-Darin and a float that large could not be sunk with anti-ship missiles or torpedoes.

They had infiltrated it, calculated out how to sink the giant float under the weight of the water, and were prepared to fill specific blocks with water.

Water was a simple weight that simply increased with volume.

Merely filling an apartment's cramped bathtub would secure two hundred kilograms. Due to the large size of the float, they could use leverage to split it down the middle like a cookie or biscuit.

In other words…

"If power is lost and a blackout covers all of the Ame-no-Darin, can we continue our mission?"

"Yes, if we set up explosives at each and every valve release location. But that would be in the quadruple digits and we would have to force our way into every part of the Ame-no-Darin."

"In that case, it would be faster to make our move before those lost children arrive at the sixth secondary power supply."

With that said, Angela Hibiscus brought her radio to her mouth.

"Teams B and D, gather our wounded and attack #6. If you can't secure it, go ahead and blow it up. We hold the central power supply, so losing one of the many secondary ones won't affect the mission."

The man she had referred to as a sergeant major tilted his head a bit like a hunting dog awaiting orders at its owner's feet.

"You aren't sending in the whole unit?"

"Don't forget our objective. Those lost children are outsiders. We were hired to sink the Ame-no-Darin, so that is what we must focus on."

Part 15

The two Objects were named the Mad Cooker and the Be Ablaze.

They took different sides in the civil war, but they both belonged to the Capitalist Corporations. The princess's Baby Magnum fought them both while quickly moving about the ocean surface.

At first, she had planned to interfere little by little from a distance to disturb their fight, but battles did not always go as planned.

She had been forced to approach them and it had developed into a three-way battle.

The princess was trying to extend the civil war surrounding the Island Nation by destroying the Be Ablaze which was trying to exterminate the self-defense PMC and the Ame-no-Darin, but she could no longer attack just the one Object.

In order to survive, she was forced to engage the Mad Cooker.

If the Baby Magnum was lost now, the thousand members of the battalion would be in danger.

"…!!"

As the princess withstood the high Gs caused by her lightning-fast evasive actions, she accurately kept track of the enemies and fired back with her seven main cannons.

The Be Ablaze used various fuels, oxidizers, and other chemicals to create flamethrowers. It used those to create a multilayer wall of heat called the Hiding Clothes of Flame and it prevented various types of targeting by distorting light.

The Mad Cooker fired a railgun that used molten salt and was theorized to automatically replenish its shells using the salt and metal in the ocean water.

(Fortunately, the two of them aren't working together. With them scattered, I can interfere from here. My only choice is to destroy them one at a time and return safely.)

She was of course targeting the Be Ablaze.

She fired her seven main cannons in different directions to cut off her opponent's escape and then fired them all together once her target had stopped.

Everything was progressing perfectly and yet she could not hit the Be Ablaze through the flames.

"Heh heh heh. Hah hah hah," laughed the enemy Elite over the radio. "I feel like a matador. But I guess I shouldn't expect too much from an unintelligent Legitimacy Kingdom Elite."

"I don't want to hear that from a rookie who has to rely on a system because he can't evade on his own. Did you feel like showing off because your parents bought you a new bike?"

"You seem to be focusing on me, so I take it you're trying to extend this war by helping the side protecting the Ame-no-Darin. …Are you serious? We sent Moss Green in there. They'll sink the Ame-no-Darin no matter what happens. You're wasting your time here."

"My fellow soldiers won't lose."

"Bullshit. This isn't about winning or losing. Moss Green is disposable. If they fail, I just have to sink the Ame-no-Darin myself . The other side never stood a chance."

"……I see you have a death wish."

"Ha ha! What do you think war is!?"

"Then I'll roast your escape hatch before blowing up your reactor."

Meanwhile, the Mad Cooker had taken up a position from which it could attack both the Baby Magnum and the Be Ablaze. As it aimed its main salt railgun, its Elite hesitantly cut into the conversation.

"Um… Have you both forgotten about the true star of the battlefield?"

"Shut up!!"

"Get the hell out of here!!!!"

After a great flash of light, the Mad Cooker was attacked from two fronts and bloomed into a giant flower on the battlefield.

"Oops."

The princess finally realized what had happened once the operator gave the damage report.

She had destroyed the self-defense PMC's Object.

If she did not do anything, there would be no one left to prevent the Be Ablaze from destroying the Ame-no-Darin. That would be a problem, so the Baby Magnum had to interfere. The two Objects put an appropriate distance between them and the battle line started gradually approaching the Ame-no-Darin.

"Heh heh heh! Hah hah hah!! Leave it to the Legitimacy Kingdom to act as a shield to protect the enemy! Even your stupid Elites try to act heroically!!"

"Honestly, why am I risking my life for this?"

The princess did a wonderful job of synchronizing her thoughts with the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers fighting to protect the Ame-no-Darin.

Baby Magnum vs. Be Ablaze.

The second round of the open-weight fight began.

Part 16

Quenser heard a quick burst of gunfire.

His fellow soldiers collapsed nearby.

"Shit, they're here!" shouted Heivia. "It's Moss Green!!"

They could not raise their heads for fear of the sniper, but the mercenaries had shown themselves by blocking the pure white corridor that led to the sixth secondary power supply. They were about 250 meters away and they numbered between 10 and 20. The straight corridor had no cover, but they had loaded several push carts with thick metal pipes and used them as shields.

On the other hand, Quenser's group had nothing to use as shields.

And they would have to travel several dozen meters to fall back . They would be shot in the back well before they reached safety.

"Oh, c'mon!!"

Still on the floor, Quenser reached for his back and pulled out a Hand Axe plastic explosive. He attached a pen-like electric fuse, tossed it toward the ceiling, and hit the switch on his radio.

The explosion was followed by the ceiling collapsing.

As he coughed, Heivia pressed up against the pile of rubble and used it as cover.

"Dammit, Quenser! Leave the firefight to us and treat the wounded. There's nothing more for a bomber to do here!!"

"I'm not a medic!"

"No one else has their hands free!! If we don't push them back, they'll throw a grenade and wipe us out!!"

Heivia and the others started firing and left Quenser alone, so he nervously turned toward the fellow soldiers who were collapsed on the floor. The pools of blood were growing and he had no idea where to start.

Along with the ones whose injuries were light enough to still move, he searched through his pouch for anything usable and lined them up on the shiny white floor.

"What's this? Did the bullet leave the body!?"

"How should I know? But stopping the bleeding comes first. He 'll die if you keep hesitating! Hold that leg. We can wrap a bandage around the thigh to stop the bleeding!!"

"Saline? What is this and how do I use it!?"

"The same as a blood transfusion!! You pour that in instead of blood to regulate the blood pressure!"

"How do you do a blood transfusion!?"

"Just like a normal IV! You find a vein on the elbow and stab in a needle!!"

Quenser's group was surprisingly lively. They sounded like students preparing for a school festival. As they desperately fired bullets from behind the rubble, Heivia's group would occasionally turn a jealous eye behind them.

"Ow… Stop, you idiot. That hurts. Don't dump disinfectant on there. It stings!"

"Ha ha ha. I'm not gonna treat you gently if you refuse to pay back the money I lent you."

"What!? Wait. Is that glue!? You're gonna seal the wound with that!? I'll pay you back with interest!!"

"Of course you will. By the way, the only other options we have here is a stapler or safety pins."

"Are there no medics over there?"

"There's one! Hey, you! The one firing the submachine gun! Being an angel in white suits you more than blood and smoke. Stop filling your body with adrenaline and get over there!"

"Eh? Eh? But my boyfriend here asked me to help out."

"It's time to ditch him! C'mon over here!!"

Heivia was finally unable to stand the flirting mood of afterschool festival preparations developing behind him, so he shouted angrily at his allies.

"Don't go stealing our nurse!! She's our one refreshment up here!!"

"What are you talking about?" said Quenser. "If you need a blonde twin-tail in a nurse cap, you have me. You should count yourself lucky because I'm too good for you."

"I get it now, Quenser. You want me to kill you, don't you!?"

Suddenly, an explosion drowned out all nearby voices.

"Bwapph!!!???"

"Dammit…. They've started firing 25mm grenades! We just don 't have enough firepower!!"

Those grenades had been developed to kill humans, so they did not destroy the rubble.

But if they were fired in an arc over the rubble, there was nothing Quenser's group could do. The explosive blast and shrapnel would wash over them.

The previous explosion had not been a simple missed shot.

They were firing a few test shots to calculate the ideal course.

Once they fired for real, Quenser's group would be slaughtered as they hid behind cover.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

"Gather all our rockets, missiles, and whatever other explosives we have! Let's blow away the push carts they're hiding behind!!"

"I'll leave it to you if you can manage it, but they're better shots than us! They'll put a bullet between your eyes while you're holding up the launcher and taking aim. And the best barrage we can manage isn't fazing them at all!!"

"Who the hell even are you!?"

"That's just mean!! I've been protecting your back this entire time!!"

Boy A started sobbing despite not looking at all feminine, so Heivia ignored him and turned toward Quenser.

For some reason, Quenser was operating his radio with bloody hands.

"What are you doing!? The cavalry isn't gonna show up if you send out an SOS!!"

"Don't be so sure."

"What?"

Heivia looked confused and his mocking expression turned to a serious one.

Quenser lightly shook his radio.

"We made our way above the waterline to escape their flooding , but I thought of another way to make use of it."

"You mean the sixth secondary power supply!? Sure, we might be able to bring down all the power supplies by messing with the emergency switchover system, but we can't get near the thing! Charging in will just get you driven back by bullets and grenades!! "

"There's something else," said Quenser without a moment's pause. He began explaining as if he had been planning this all along. "Heivia, the cavalry has changed quite a bit these days. They have armor that can resist nukes, they have gigantic cannons that can split open the earth, and they're piloted by beautiful girls. "

"You don't mean…"

"What else could I mean but an Object?"

Their sight and hearing were completely blown away.

This went well beyond an explosion.

This was meant to aid Quenser's group, but they were thrown to the pure white floor. The soldiers already on the floor were sent rolling.

"B-babh!? Bbah!? Bbgweh!!"

"D-don't worry. I understand, Heivia. This is time for explanations, right? I received a report that the princess destroyed the Mad Cooker. That increased her range of motion, so I had her assist us during the openings in her battle against the Be Ablaze. Wink"

"Bh… I was trying to ask if you had any last words!!!"

Object shells generally could not attack deep below the sea. In order for Quenser to request assistance from the princess, they had to make their way above the waterline.

The Ame-no-Darin's corridor had twisted like a sugar sculpture and some of it had been torn off. The first shot had been near Quenser's group in order to mark off their safe area. The subsequent shells gradually moved farther away and brought death closer and closer to Moss Green.

Metal pipes on push carts were not enough to protect them from this ferocity.

The Moss Green mercenaries frantically tried to retreat, but the entire structure shook with tremendous force and they could not run properly.

The corridor was destroyed as if being bitten into.

The pure white corridor, the structure, and the soldiers were all crushed and thrown through the air.

Quenser covered one ear with a hand, pressed his radio against the other ear, and shouted into it.

"Stop!! Stop firing!!"

"There's too much noise on your end, so I can't hear you," replied the princess.

"You just fired on the sixth secondary power supply!! Our destination is gone!!"

The metal door three hundred meters ahead was blown up from the other side and it spewed flames and smoke.

Heivia tapped Quenser's shoulder in resignation.

"Our luck ran out once our great demon god had to take part in a conflict between humans. If it was blown up, there's nothing we can do. We'll have to go to the next closest power supply."

The embankment-like place a few kilometers over the ocean was struck by the Baby Magnum's shells. The structure was torn to shreds where the sniper was presumably lurking.

"The other secondary power supplies are still okay, right?"

"I want to leave the rest to the princess and go home."

"I'd love to, but our mission will end in failure if the Ame-no-Darin splits in half and sinks. We need to put in a little more effort to lengthen this civil war."

But then they spotted motion beyond the rubble that no longer functioned as a corridor. It was 250 meters ahead at the corner from which the Moss Green group had appeared.

They saw a woman with long silver hair and brown skin.

She was part of Moss Green, but the simplified medals on her ample chest suggested she held a fairly high rank.

"Now you've done it, Legitimacy Kingdom dogs! This is a Capitalist Corporations problem."

"No, it's an Island Nation problem! We're both outsiders here!"

Heivia targeted the brown woman with his assault rifle, but the Ame-no-Darin lurched disconcertingly as an aftereffect of the Baby Magnum's bombardment. He could not aim steadily and his bullets hit the wall next to her.

The thorough Object bombardment had destroyed the walls, the ceiling, and even the floor.

It felt like Quenser and Heivia were separated from Moss Green by a 250 meter ravine.

Quenser raised his middle finger.

"Let's call this a tie, so withdraw your unit! Whether you're from the Northern Restricted Zone or wherever else, flesh-and-blood soldiers can't withstand the ferocity of an Object!"

"Is that so? Don't forget your goal, sheltered little boy."

The Ame-no-Darin shook once more and the ground below their feet felt like a small boat on a stormy night.

"What was that!?" Heivia paled. "That didn't match the timing of the princess's bombardment!"

"Our goal is to sink the Ame-no-Darin. We can operate the necessary bulkheads and seawater valves from the central power supply, so now we only have to wait for leverage to bend the giant float until it breaks down the center like a biscuit."

The ground shook even more.

It sometimes reached a tilt of thirty degrees. Quenser wanted to grab onto something so he did not fall, so he reached for a crack in the floor. However, he heard a gunshot and orange sparks flew from nearby.

The silver-haired brown woman 250 meters away held a handgun.

Normally, 150 meters was the limit for a handgun even with careful aim. The fact that it had taken her only one shot to accurately fire right next to his hand while everything shook showed just how well-trained she was.

Quenser reflexively drew back his hand like a turtle sensing danger and drawing its head into its shell.

And that was exactly what the woman wanted.

"Wait! Watch out, Quenser!!" shouted Heivia.

But as if he were slipping down a slide, Quenser was thrown into the giant "ravine" opened in the pure white floor.

After seeing that, the brown woman licked her lips and jumped in after him.

They would be below the cold ocean there.

The Object could not provide proper support for anyone down there.

Part 17

"Gah!?" gasped Quenser as something struck his back.

The thick metal pipes running everywhere like blood vessels reminded him that he had fallen to a lower level.

Something must have happened to the wiring because the lights were out. The area was dark and his back was soaking wet because a giant puddle of seawater covered the entire floor. This was below the waterline, so he hoped it was from a burst pipe. A broken exterior wall would be truly terrible.

He stood up, leaned against a nearby column, and thought.

(What do I do? I can't get back up the way I came, so I have to find a different set of stairs. Can I get the lights on? Or would that tell the enemy where I am?)

He then heard some static from his radio.

He hoped it was from Heivia or the others, but it was not.

"A rat in the birdcage."

He grimaced.

That was the silver-haired brown woman he had spoken with before. She was most likely Moss Green's commander here.

(When did they break our encryption!?)

"Listen. I said a rat, not a little bird. Raptors prefer lively prey."

"You've already won. Ame-no-Darin really does seem to be sinking. We can't turn this around and the Legitimacy Kingdom can't keep this civil war going if it sinks. So what more do you want? Don't you have to retreat as well!?"

"It's simple."

Quenser looked around as he listened to her.

The area was dark and his enemy had to be skilled at remaining hidden. A near-amateur student would not be able to find her by effort alone.

"Sinking the Ame-no-Darin was our top priority and we got that over with quickly. That means we can veer off course and deal with a more personal and meaningless objective. As long as we accomplish our mission, the higher ups will turn a blind eye to a short detour."

"Don't tell me you're taking revenge for your killed men."

"They weren't the type to die in a place like this."

For the first time, human emotion poured into her voice.

Trusting the chill running down his spine, Quenser checked over his equipment again. He had a balled-up diving suit, an oxygen tank, and the Hand Axe plastic explosive. In his survival kit, he had a small knife and a metal skewer, but he could not use

them very well. Not even Heivia would think of handling a Northern Restricted Zone warrior with only a knife.

"I couldn't bear to throw them into the ruthless Northern Restricted Zone right after they finished boot camp. Before showing them true hell, I wanted them to prove themselves in these lukewarm battlefields and earn a few medals. But look at this . Now I have to bury them without anything decorating their chests. How can this happen? With a funeral as pathetic as this, they'll never live down the shame even in heaven."

"I thought the people who lived where Objects are banned would know just how unreasonable this line of work is. If you didn't like it, you should have claimed they weren't suited for this and swept them aside. You were in a position to do that!!"

"This is where that was supposed to be tested!! They were supposed to shoot you sheltered snot-nosed brats like it was a walk in the park!!"

Quenser finally felt he had seen where her anger was coming from.

She was not simply angry that her men had been killed.

If they had died in their actual battlefield in the Northern Restricted Zone, she may have written it off as unavoidable.

But this was below them.

She had looked down on it.

As a warrior, she was unable to forgive the fact that they had been killed by scrawny Quenser and the others who could only fight while protected by an Object. If someone died in single combat with a great warrior or a hero, their name might remain in history, but that death would be meaningless if they were instead killed in their sleep by wild dogs or bandits that were digging through the dead on the battlefield. This was no different. They had never been treating Quenser or his fellow soldiers as human.

She had said her men were not the type to die in a place like this .

That proved it more than anything else.

"You're twisted. I feel like an idiot for thinking I did something wrong even for a moment."

"I will take off your head, you damn poodle. It's high time you learned to fear the wolf who was born in the forest and rules the mountain. I'll leave you in such a tragic state that they won't know what to carve on your grave, but I'll at least stuff your head and offer it in place of fruit."

In that dark place, the thoroughly trained wolf began preparing for her silent hunt.

If Quenser did nothing, his throat would be torn out.

Even if he gave this a normal level of effort or tried to protect himself with the standard methods, his weak poodle legs would not accomplish much.

He checked over his equipment again: balled up diving suit, oxygen tank, Hand Axe plastic explosive, small knife, and metal skewer. However, he doubted any of that would be of much use.

What could he do with only those supplies?

If he did not find an answer, his fate was sealed.

Part 18

Naturally, Angela Hibiscus did not let her guard down even when facing a foolish poodle.

She had judged the enemy's equipment at a glance before even luring him down here.

He was a combat engineer.

The plastic explosives on his back would be his primary weapon. He did not carry a rifle or even a sidearm handgun, so he may have been a battlefield student. Other than the explosives, he would likely have an insignificant knife in his survival kit and he also had the balled up diving suit on his waist and an oxygen tank.

She focused more on the diving suit than the explosives.

Anyone with half a brain would never think of actually defeating her in a straight fight. She was only armed with a large military knife and a handgun, but she was confident in her ability to execute him without a scratch on her even if he were armed with a light machinegun.

If he was hoping to win, he would not try to attack at any one point.

In other words, he would use an attack that thoroughly filled the entire space. With that, he could defeat her while ignoring her combat skill.

They were below the waterline and he had a diving suit and an oxygen tank, so the most obvious method would be to fill the area with water.

(But he won't do that. The valves won't function in this blackout, but he could open them by destroying them with explosives. But if he causes too fast and powerful a surge, he won't escape unscathed either.)

It was similar to a drowned corpse being swept down a mountain stream filled with rocks. With the powerful current striking the body against the hard outcroppings again and again, entire limbs could be torn off. The boy's synthetic diving suit could not withstand that sort of impact.

(If he slowly opens the valves manually to avoid that danger, the flooding will take too long. I can slit his throat a hundred times over before it takes effect.)

The diving suit was made to withstand a certain level of water pressure, but it was not solid enough to stop the explosive blast of a bomb.

That meant he could not place bombs around the area and cause a giant explosion.

That left only one option.

(There's a puddle of seawater at our feet.)

She used her night vision to observe her surroundings.

She could see her foolish target's back from where she was.

(That synthetic diving suit is an insulator. He can use electricity as an attack that will only affect me.)

She grinned and adjusted her grip on the knife and handgun.

(Sorry, but the Object attack destroyed the circuitry. There's no electricity to send through the seawater in this blackout! The very bombardment that tore my men to pieces has spelled your doom!!)

She took in a short breath and began to move.

Despite the seawater puddle covering the floor, she moved swiftly yet almost silently toward Quenser's back.

But at that very moment, he took a strange action.

There was no way he had noticed her approaching from behind, but he suddenly put on his diving suit's helmet and held something in his hand.

She had one more step to go.

In just one second, the knife in her hand would cross his shoulder and reach his windpipe.

And he reached a hand toward the button on his radio.

(A bomb!!!???)

She did not have time to judge the meaning of the action.

An instant later, an explosion compressed the air in the entire area.

Part 19

The aerial PMC named Sky Blue Inc. was working alongside Moss Green. Mariydi Whitewitch, their ace pilot, frowned as she received instructions over the radio.

That lovely blonde-haired girl was filled with fierce anger.

"You're calling off the attack? You're telling us to retreat!? What is going on, CT!? Don't get in my way! I'm one attack away from shooting down Burning Alpha!!"

"CT to Ice Girl 1. Getting this worked up is a sign of danger. We came here to unilaterally earn some points, not for a 50/50 battle. Don't forget the entire reason we are here."

"Just one more and my kill count will be a nice round number and I want a good story to tell. Give me this one!!"

"CT to Ice Girl 1. The Legitimacy Kingdom's first generation has sunk the Capitalist Corporations' Ningyo and Yuuhi. Surprisingly, it won despite being outnumbered two-to-one. Its Elite is very skilled. With that burden gone, it can now move over a wider area. If you don't finish up soon, you'll be its next target. Sky Blue's only job was to destroy some ships and spread confusion through their chain of command. We have no clear goal like Moss Green. Do you want to be known as someone who never returned from this lukewarm battlefield?"

"But!!"

"Stop complaining, Ice Girl 1. You have already done more than enough for a bonus and an aircraft can't hope to oppose an Object if it is actively targeting you. This has nothing to do with your skill . Turn back immediately. Or do you enjoy putting your men in danger because you were blinded by the prize of shooting down an ace?"

The girl clicked her tongue and angrily raised the volume of her smartphone.

The Legitimacy Kingdom ace named Burning Alpha spoke cheerfully over the open band.

"What? Are you leaving in the middle of our date? Well, maybe you need to grow up a bit before you can handle anything more. Go on. Get home before it gets dark. Don't get lost."

"Come visit the Northern Restricted Zone. I'll kill you in an instant!! And don't act so tough when your left wingtip is spewing smoke! You have your hand on the eject lever, don't you!?"

"You say that, but you had one of your men cut in and take one of my AAM locks for you. I will praise you for using smoke to escape my visual identification afterwards, though. Without that, you'd be swimming in the middle of enemy territory right now. Were you too scared to go on a date without your big brother to protect that cute little ass of yours?"

"I-I'll kill you!! I'll kill you right now!!"

Mariydi tried to tilt the stick, but three fellow members of the Ice Unit had her marked on the top and either side. They were only a few meters apart, so she would collide with them if she tried to turn.

She held her head in her hands and let out a large sigh.

She kicked the flight recorder at her feet and spoke.

"Those pieces of shit got lucky this time."

In her irritation, she cursed Burning Alpha and all the other major targets she missed out on.

That included base commander-class officer Frolaytia Capistrano on the flagship aircraft carrier.

"I hope I see you on the battlefield again soon."

Part 20

What Quenser had done was quite simple.

He did not use the blast to kill.

He instead modified the amount of explosive to keep it nonlethal. It was just enough force to apply tremendous pressure to the inner ear that controlled balance.

If he had simply set it off, he would have collapsed along with Angela.

And that well-trained woman would have recovered faster than a scrawny boy like him, so she would have killed him afterwards.

But that was why he had put on the diving suit's helmet. The helmet was made to withstand a fair bit of water pressure. It could not withstand the pressure of an explosion that could smash a human skeleton, but it could hold off a blast weakened so it only affected the inner ear.

He removed the helmet, looked around, and finally realized that Angela had approached within a step of his back. The discovery did not please him.

"I'm glad I didn't try to say anything clever before setting it off."

As he spoke, a rope fell down from the top of the "ravine".

"Hey, Quenser!" shouted down Heivia. "Get on up here!!"

"Sure," he answered as he grabbed the bottom of the rope.

He could not climb up on his own, so he would have to let those with some strength left pull him up.

But then he glanced over toward the many pillars.

The base of one of them appeared to have been opened up, but it was not due to the explosion. A part had been removed.

He had seen something similar before.

With a very bad feeling in his gut, he frantically pulled out his handheld device. He found similar opened spots in the photos he had previously taken in the Ame-no-Darin.

He had assumed construction of the facility had stopped before it was complete.

But if that was not the case…

"Wait."

After tying Angela's hands with the end of the rope, he slapped her cheek.

He had to check on something.

"What is this? Why are there pieces missing here and there from the walls and ceilings as if this is an unfinished jigsaw puzzle!? It's almost like the parts needed to build something else were secretly shipped in during the construction of the Ame-no-Darin!!"

"You didn't know?"

Angela opened her eyes a bit and grimaced after noticing how tightly her arms were bound.

"This was a giant workshop that the Island Nation…no, that the rogue self-defense PMC prepared in order to construct a new model of Object without anyone interfering. And if it isn't here anymore, that means it was completed and let out into the world."

The trigger of the next war had long since been pulled.

Chapter 2: Where Has the New Model Disappeared To? >> Minesweeping Battle in the Far West Pacific District

Part 1

Mission Report A-01

March 17 – 1030 Hours

Ocean of the Far West Pacific District – Disguised Cruiser Scarlet Princess

"Moss Green sank the Ame-no-Darin."

Frolaytia spoke from the disguised cruiser that had killed those pirates.

More specifically, she was lying face up on one of the beach chairs lined up by a pool on the front of the triple deck.

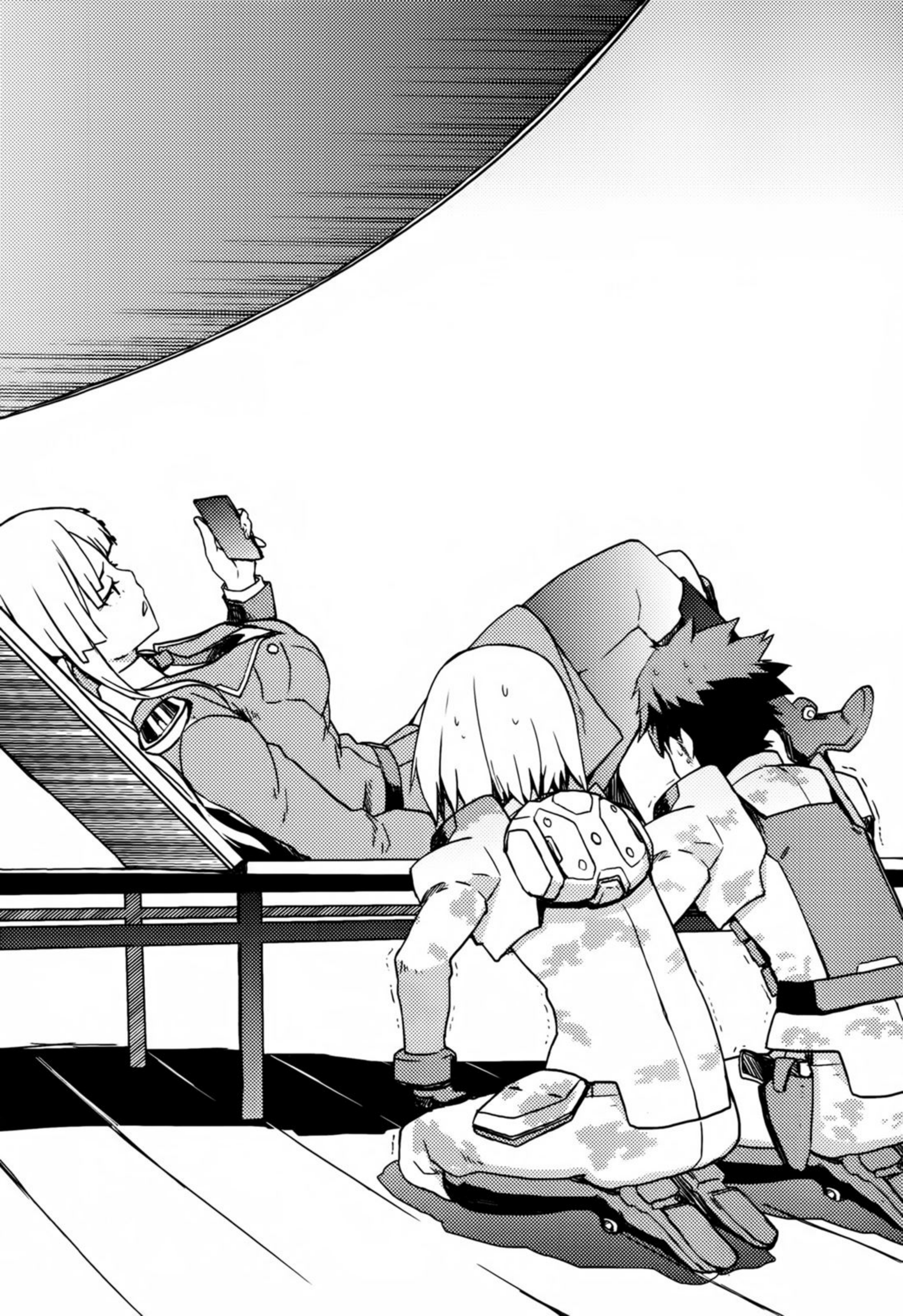
The two idiots Quenser and Heivia were sitting next to that beach chair. From the princess's location not far away, they looked a lot like the kind of people who need certain special conditions met for arousal.

The Scarlet Princess would be unable to continue luring out pirates if it was seen working alongside the military, so its entire

exterior was swapped out between each mission in order to change its coloring and silhouette. It did not matter if someone managed to snap a picture of it.

"And it was all thanks to some idiots doing such a wonderful job. But the top levels of our military are tolerant and they respect both honor and order. The photographs Quenser took inside the facility and the testimony from the captured Moss Green commander have almost completely substantiated the claim that a new model of Object was constructed inside the Ame-no-Darin. You just barely scraped by this time. …But even then, that failure was only cancelled out once we added in the two Capitalist Corporations Objects the princess destroyed."

The two idiots began trembling.



As Europeans, they were not used to sitting in the *seiza* style, a wonder of the East that Frolaytia had introduced them to. They could only last a few minutes on a cushion, so the hard tiles of the poolside were a living hell. To be blunt, their knees felt ready to explode.

"(What's going on? Why is Frolaytia in sister-in-law mode!?)"

"(How the hell should I know!? I just pray she doesn't get any older. If she still acted like this as an old woman, there'd be nothing of value left!! In fact, I'm hoping for a miracle where those giant tits get smaller as she ages!!)"

"You two."

Frolaytia cut off her subordinates' complaints with a voice that had the same effect as gently pressing stiletto heels against their hunkered backs.

But the pain of sitting like that had made them desperate enough that there was no stopping them.

"And another thing! You're lying on a beach chair next to a luxury cruise ship's pool, so why aren't you in a swimsuit!? Don't you understand how this is supposed to work!? And that goes for you too, princess!!"

"Hm?"

The princess looked over in confusion, but Frolaytia spoke up before that airhead could say anything unnecessary.

"It is mid-March and we're far enough out at sea for Pacific Bluefin tuna to be jumping around. The clear blue sky is chilly, so there is no reason to wear a swimsuit."

"I'm holding you to that!! That was a set-up for a North Wind and the Sun situation!! You've more or less promised to wear a swimsuit if we move to the warm Southern Hemisphere! Yahoo!! Giant breasts in a slingshot swimsuit await us!!"

"Wait, Heivia. Even if it's Frolaytia, it would be cruel to rely exclusively on her for eye candy! We need to get the princess in a micro bikini. And we can add cat ears and a tail as options!!"

A raging torrent of fleshly desires raced through the two idiots' bodies and they felt like leaping into the air despite the uncomfortable sitting position.

They were growing a little too annoying, so Frolaytia got down from the beach chair, grabbed them by the back of the neck, and chucked them into the pool.

Extreme cold washed over their bodies and seemed to squeeze at their hearts.

The princess tilted her head a bit, but showed no intention of rescuing them.

"Habh!? Bhah!! Th-this is hopeless. There's no chance of this turning into a love comedy!!"

"Th-th-th-th-th-this feels like a villa's seasonal pool when it's covered in green moss!!"

"As a commoner, it kinda pisses me off that you didn't think of a school pool!"

"Oh, you wanna fight? You've got some nerve getting your clothes all wet and see-through when you aren't even a girl!!"

As her two stupid servants started grappling in the freezing pool, Frolaytia lay back down on the beach chair and gave an order with an annoyed wave of the arm.

"If you aren't up here in *seiza* position in ten seconds, you have to stay soaking up to your shoulders for the rest of the conversation."

"Sir, yes, sir!!"

"Sir, yes, sir!!"

To escape the hell of an ice bath, they obediently obeyed their orders for once, but they regretted it three seconds after returning to their previous positions.

"I-I'm freezing!! It's the wind! The wind is sapping my body heat!"

"Is this what you call heat of vaporization? I think my uniform's gonna freeze!!"

"Would you rather jump back in?" asked Frolaytia with a look even icier than the winter pool.

"No thank you, ma'am!!" answered Quenser as his teeth chattered.

Heivia forgot to answer, so he was thrown back into the hellish pool.

After waiting for Heivia to splash his way back up onto land, Frolaytia started speaking seriously once more.

"Fortunately, our radar detected something giant that is likely this New Model. At first, we assumed the self-defense PMC had picked up on the attack against the Ame-no-Darin and was using a submarine to evacuate the most important equipment and personnel."

They had picked it up on radar but not attacked.

It sounded negligent, but Frolaytia's mission had been to intensify the Capitalist Corporations civil war surrounding the Ame-no-Darin. When too much damage to one side would bring the civil war to an end, they had been unable to blindly attack a submarine that might carry important leaders or supporters. They had also reported what they had detected, but they had not received word on whether to attack or not.

If anyone had given a bad order, it would have been recorded and responsibility would have fallen on them, so no one had given the go-sign and the decision had been left to the local commander.

In that case, they could not blame her for letting it go.

"Does that mean what I think it means about the Island Nation's new model of Object?" asked Quenser as he raised his hand.

"It is certainly an exclusively naval Object." Frolaytia remained on the beach chair. "But this new model is a deep sea Object with the ability to dive underwater. The ocean is the primary battlefield anyone in the Island Nation is going to think of, so it isn't too surprising they would try to develop an offshoot of the standard Objects that battle on the ocean surface."

"But," cut in Heivia as he trembled in the *seiza* position next to Quenser. "Objects are giant balls over fifty meters long. Submerge something like that in the ocean and you can't keep it quiet! Anyone'll be able to pick it up on radar or sonar!"

Needless to say, the biggest reason submarines were submerged was to travel without the enemy noticing.

That put restrictions on their sizes and designs. No matter how sturdy, fast, and powerful you made it, all the noise it made while travelling through the water would be fatal. The enemy could concentrate fire on it and quickly turn it into a bed for fishes.

And a round Object was just about the worst option for that.

No matter how carefully it moved, it would be found right away.

In fact, the Legitimacy Kingdom military had already found it.

"It isn't trying to hide its location."

Frolaytia's sudden comment from the beach chair made no sense.

"It seems to use water in a different way than normal submarines. This New Model still has its pride as an Object, so it appears to have been created in order to win wars by crushing the enemy force head on without even trying to run or hide."

"…?"

Quenser looked confused, so Frolaytia entered a few simple commands into her handheld device.

As soon as she did, light electronic tones came from the two idiots' devices. She had apparently sent them some data.

"(I really don't want to look at that. An email from a superior has never ended well for me. …Hey, Quenser? Quenser! Why do you look so excited!? There's no way this is self-filmed porn featuring those giant breasts!!)"

"(Based on what she said, this must be data on the New Model developed in secret by the Island Nation! I can't believe I'm so lucky!! You'd never get to see this while attending a safe country school. Pant pant. I'm so glad I came to the battlefield. Pant pant!!)
"

"(You're creeping me out!! I think marrying an android girl is the only option for a pervert like you! Wait! Get away from me! I don't want to catch your perversion!!)"

Quenser ignored Heivia's complaints and played the video attached to the email.

It seemed to show the sea at night, but there were no landmarks to help him place it aside from the stars which suggested it was in the Northern Hemisphere.

The night-vision footage was grainy and the gray-scale contrast was emphasized. The camera shook around a lot as if the waves were knocking it about.

"If we just sent in a UAV, it would be shot down by anti-air lasers, so we attach cameras and external storage to driftwood and let a bunch float in from outside the combat zone. Transmitting the data could give away their location, so there's no telling what they filmed until we retrieve them. When you get down to it, it's a gamble."

Fortunately, Quenser and Heivia had not been tasked with finding the proper footage from that massive amount of data like they were a middle-aged woman working from home. They had been passed pre edited footage.

A giant black form distinct from the darkness of the night was visible in the center of the ocean.

Quenser could see something flashing like St. Elmo's fire, but that was likely the sensors attached to the ends of the cannons.

"That's the New Model?"

"Do some research, Quenser. This is the Capitalist Corporations ' representative second generation. Our codename for it is Crown Shark. No Object can outdo it when it comes to destroying its enemy and it is known for the container-style multiple railgun known as the shark's tooth. Instead of taking careful aim, it takes care of an entire 'surface'. It creates an area of complete destruction over thirty degrees from left to right and for a distance of ten kilometers. It can only attack three times, but not even an Object can escape destruction if it enters that zone of death."

"You said it belongs to the Capitalist Corporations, so was it sent in to take care of the Island Nation?" complained Heivia.

"But wait." Quenser frowned. "The Crown Shark uses a special railgun and the New Model operates underwater. In that case…"

"That's right." Frolaytia shrugged atop the beach chair. "The New Model is located 1500 meters below the surface, so there is a thick layer of water in the way."

Several explosions burst from the small screen. Silly-looking pillars of water rose like upside down waterfalls, but the massive shield of water was impenetrable.

And on top of that, this New Model had the heavy armor of an Object that could withstand a nuclear weapon.

"There's nothing it can do," muttered Quenser in irritation. "It isn't even an issue of strong or weak; it's just a poor matchup. Why did they try to defeat someone at the bottom of the ocean using metal shells?"

"I'm not from the Capitalist Corporations, so I couldn't tell you. Someone may have wanted the Crown Shark to take the credit or its next kill may have been a nice round number. That said, they did give it some thought. At first, the Crown Shark focused on the remaining forces fleeing from the Ame-no-Darin on high-speed boats. They may have thought their screams would draw the New Model to the surface."

"But it didn't surface. It used its thick armor, abandoned its fellow soldiers, and continued hiding at the bottom of the ocean."

"It wasn't completely coldhearted. Keep watching and you'll see it strike back in revenge."

The dark ocean surface was split apart from below.

The moisture in the ocean wind must have been affected as well because a thick orange line remained burned in the air.

That was the New Model's main cannon.

"A laser beam!?"

"With that, the thick layer of water doesn't matter. Even down where the sunlight can't reach, the power of an Object can overcome the attenuation and reach the surface while boiling the

seawater. This allows it to fire on its enemy's belly while hiding deep in the ocean."

"What?" Heivia frowned. "Doesn't that make it only useful against metal shells like railguns or coilguns? If we use an Object with a laser beam main cannon, our attacks will reach it. And the resistance of the water is so much more than the air that it can't evade very quickly. What's the point?"

"The point is where it is hiding," said Frolaytia offhand. "It's right next to a submarine volcano. In other words, there is an extreme difference in water temperature around it. You can think of it like a more intense version of a mirage and it causes a blatant effect on optical weaponry like laser beams."

On the screen, the Crown Shark took repeated quick evasive actions.

But the actions did not look calculated. The pilot Elite was clearly confused.

Its main cannon could not reach the enemy, but the Elite must have thought this was better than doing nothing. It would occasionally force its anti-air lasers to fire straight down.

Quenser gulped.

"So this New Model uses the thick wall of water and the temperature difference created by the submarine volcano to stop all attacks with metal shells and optical weaponry?"

"If it were a normal submarine, its outer shell could be blown open with torpedoes, mines, depth charges, or underwater laser beams, but the sturdy armor of an Object overturns that assumption. Not even a nuclear torpedo could sink this thing. Even with a ton of laser weapons, it would be difficult to hit. The weapons of the Object age won't work here. This is part of the Galapagos evolution unique to the Island Nation."

It would normally hide behind the temperature change and would poke out through an invisible crack when firing its main cannon.

It was doubtful even a laser beam Object would be able to put up much of a fight.

As the Crown Shark continued to unilaterally be attacked from below, it started to retreat, but the instant it paused proved to be a mistake.

A tremendous pillar of light skewered the second generation and produced a tremendous explosion that swept away the darkness of the night.

"The Island Nation's self-defense PMC looked inferior, but I guess they did everything they could to hide the construction of this thing," muttered Heivia blankly. "They basically stole the Object officially lent to them, but they weren't satisfied with that. Who knows how complete this New Model was at the time, but if it had been fully functioning and protecting the Ame-no-Darin, we 'd all be the skull-and-bones crew of a ghost ship right about now. "

The trick for this New Model had been to build it in secret until it could be submerged.

Now that it was complete, there was no need to hide it.

Now that it was at the bottom of the ocean, it would not hide and it would wait for the perfect timing for a surprise attack.

The New Model created by the Island Nation would settle into its deep sea palace as the king of the ocean.

"If you don't want that to happen in the future, you need to think up a plan," said Frolaytia while still lying down. "After all, we will likely be the next ones to face the New Model."

Part 2

Mission Report B-01

March 21 – 2200 Hours

Legitimacy Kingdom New Caledonia District – Special Political Prison "Château de Rouge"

It was pitch black.

Several watchtower searchlights cut through that darkness and pointed toward something quite large.

The never-ending lukewarm downpour implicitly indicated this was a tropical country.

With an eerie rumbling, a giant form directly entered the giant facility that floated on the ocean.

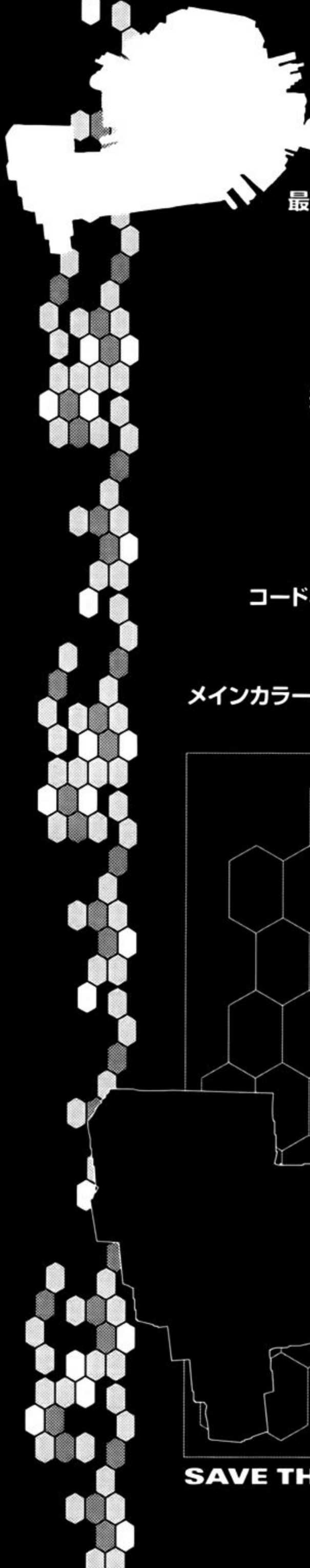
That artificial island in the southern sea was also known as the " Vineyard of Red Wine". A few foundations that resembled offshore drilling platforms were connected by a jungle gym-like structure made of metal and that jungle gym had square containers hanging down from it.

The entire structure was a hexagon with three kilometers sides and a height of forty meters. The hanging containers were divided into twelve different layers.

The kind of metal passageways and stairways seen at a construction site were attached here and there below the jungle gym, but they were only used by the jailers. The prisoners almost never used them.

The containers were prison cell modules. There were about 1500 of them and that number was equivalent to the current number of prisoners.

The giant form slowly entering that hexagon was an Object.



【セーブ・ザ・ロジスティクス】
SAVE THE LOGISTICS

全長… 102メートル

最高速度… 時速490キロ(限界積載時)

装甲… 5センチ×200層(溶接など不純物含む)

用途… 海戦専用第二世代

分類… 兵站輸送支援兵器

運用者…『正統王国』

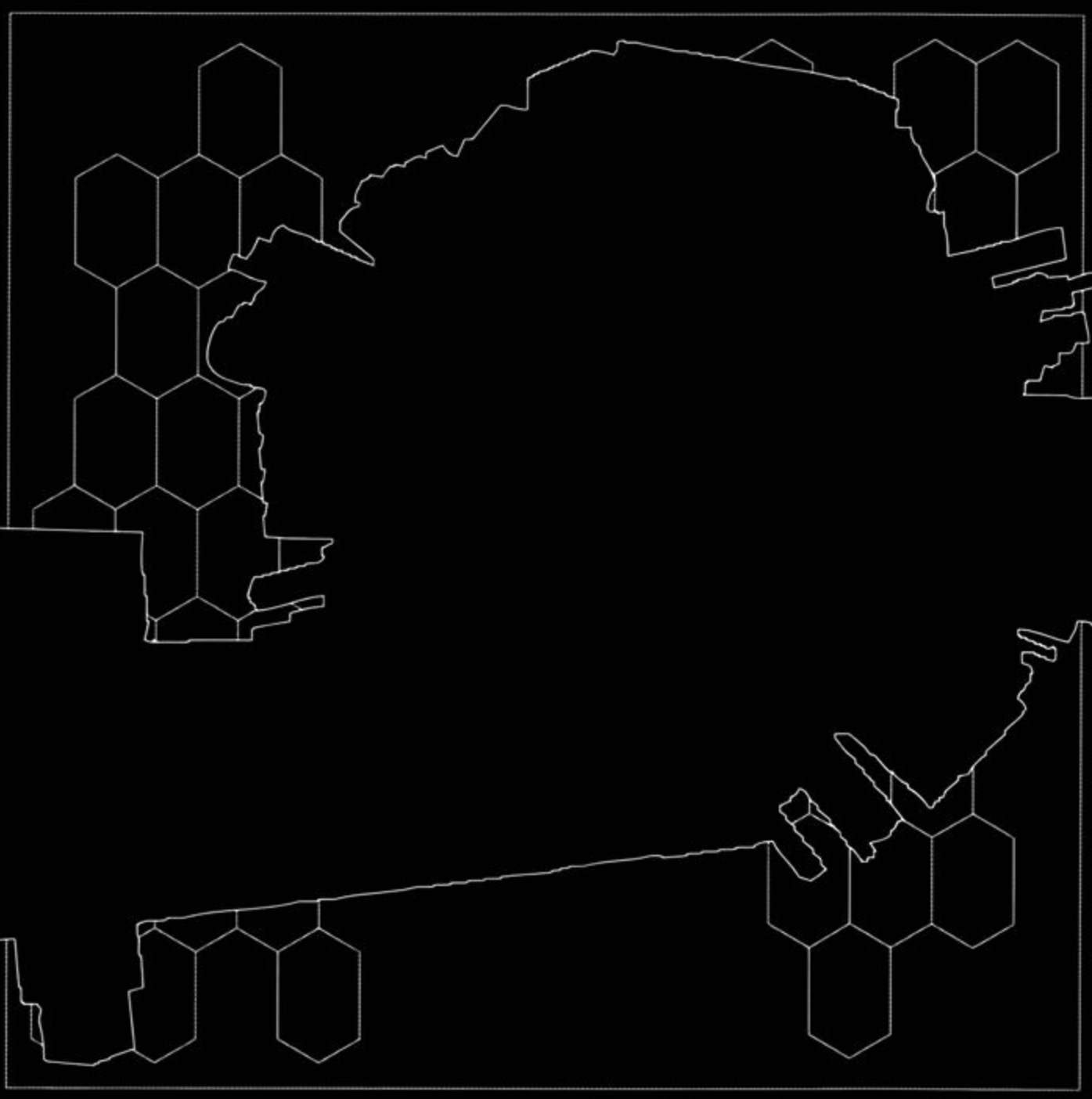
仕様… 静電気式推進+海戦用フロート

主砲… 下位安定式プラズマ砲×2

副砲… レーザービーム、コイルガンなど

コードネーム… セーブ・ザ・ロジスティクス
(輸送船団に代わり、オブジェクトそのものが
兵站の運搬をするところから)

メインカラーリング… 黒



SAVE THE LOGISTICS

It was a Legitimacy Kingdom second generation Object codenamed Save the Logistics and it was an experimental model with an emphasis on transporting supplies. Simply put, it was too much of a hassle to send multiple Objects to protect fragile transport fleets on long journeys, so they had tried to design an Object to which the containers could be directly attached.

Ultimately, the extra weight had raised the damage rate during high-speed battles and the extremely high Gs of the evasive actions had crushed the contents of the containers, so it had not gotten much use.

As such, it was primarily used for missions other than transporting supplies.

For example, it would escort criminals with a risk of attack or escape during transport, such as mafia bosses or terrorist ringleaders.

Countless boxy containers seemed to cover the Object's round body and wires from the cranes at the peak of the hexagonal jungle gym attached to them.

The crane arm swung them around so violently one would never think a person was contained within and they would be attached to one of the empty spaces on the jungle gym.

The rain striking one such sturdy container's roof was quite noisy.

That tropical rain was very different from the rain the prisoner inside had seen back in his safe country.

That prisoner looked around the container cell that contained nothing but a sleeping bag and a flush toilet.

Leaving that cell was forbidden, yet there was no shower or even a sink. The only real water source was the space above the toilet tank meant for washing one's hands. He would have to use that for everything if he did not want to dry up.

There was of course nothing fancy like an air conditioner and the container did not have a single window. The only connection to the outside world was the long, narrow slit through which he would receive his food tray and the single ventilation fan on the wall. Both of those let in the hot and humid air of the southern hemisphere, so the living conditions were truly horrible. It felt like a human body would melt away if left there for too long.

The prisoner boy wiped sweat from his cheek with the back of his hand and approached the container's metal wall.

He leaned his back against the wall below the ventilation fan.

"Hey!" he shouted over the downpour.

He had heard about this cruel prison before being thrown into it .

There were a few different ways for prisoners to communicate.

For example, they could send signals by tapping on the metal walls.

Several different code patterns had spread throughout the facility and only one who swore allegiance to a specific group would obtain one. If someone decoded one without doing so, they would be punished for "eavesdropping". Prisoners were supposedly never allowed out of their cells yet they could punish other prisoners, so there seemed to be some sort of loophole.

And the first step for a newcomer was the ventilation fan.

That was the sole route through which his voice could directly reach the next container, so he had to contact his neighbor. It would be best to learn what groups there were and which one to swear allegiance to, so he had to get that information out of them.

Just because the prisoners could not leave their cells did not mean one could live comfortably on one's own. If one was viewed as dangerous, every other group would work against them and they could not survive like that.

"What did you do to get in here? It must have been quite something to get you taken to the farthest reaches of the world here, but we might get along depending on what it is. But if it had anything to do with drugs or abducting kids, I'll never speak with you again."

"Hyehhh…" he heard through the vent.

It was gentle female voice.

She finally spoke back so weakly that the rain almost drowned her out.

“Th-that wasn’t it. I-I was brought here for something I didn’t do…” A short silence followed as she steadied her breathing. “ A-and this is a very strange prison where only innocent people are sent.”

“Yeah,” groaned the prisoner boy as he leaned against the wall.

Lightning struck nearby and produced a flash of light from the vent as if from a camera. The light illuminated the prisoner’s face for just an instant.

He was Quenser Barbotage.

That battlefield student had infiltrated this “very strange prison ”. After deciding the voice he heard was the same as the recording he had heard, his tone of voice changed completely.

“I know. This is an official facility that allows the Legitimacy Kingdom’s rotten nobles to imprison commoners they don’t like with made-up crimes. The place is filled with accountants who tried to report a client’s tax evasion, rich farmers who tried to create negotiation groups by bringing together farmers who worked hard but didn’t earn anything, nuns who gave bread to poor children every day, and others like that. At the very least, no one here is a real villain and you’re the same.”

That was another reason the prison was known as the Château de Rouge.

One reason was the way all the container cells hanging down from the jungle gym looked a bit like layers of grapes.

Another was how innocent people were locked up, made to suffer, and had their red blood squeezed from them.

"You are Mariage Nightcap, a graduate student at Cambridge University in the Legitimacy Kingdom's South Britain district. Your field of study is mechanical engineering and data processing. While in that safe country, you aided the military by revealing the weaknesses of our own Objects."

Quenser had been unable to bring any documents into the container with him, so this all came from the knowledge in his head.

This environment would not overlook anything even if it was in his stomach.

"The turning point in your life was when you set your sights on enemy Objects instead. Namely, the Capitalist Corporations' well-known second generation Object known as the Private Bank. That special Object contained the entire main sever of a tax haven bank thought to exist in the Cayman Islands. Officially, this was to better protect the clients' money and personal information, but it was actually a means of learning about the secret transactions of VIPs from the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization and to secretly

gain their 'support'. In other words, they tried to create an ' undefeatable Object' from a political standpoint rather than a military one."

Destroying the Object on the battlefield would be destroying the massive account data of important figures from every world power. And if the remains could be recovered and analyzed, their illegal transactions and illicit deeds would come to light.

No one could touch it.

It belonged to the Capitalist Corporations, but it did not even have to obey the orders its superiors gave it.

"That's when you sent a virus into the Private Bank's main server and swiped all the personal information. In reality, you just created a fake list that *looked like* you had done that, but the general populous didn't know how to recognize the secret data and couldn 't tell if it was real or not. You then began a multi-wave attack of information warfare to convince people that you had penetrated every line of defense and acquired all the data."

"The secret VIPs decided there was no more reason to support the Private Bank and they decided to destroy it to take revenge. By the time they realized it was all a bluff on my part, the Private Bank was already a pile of scrap metal at the bottom of the Indian Ocean."

Mariage had taken the initiative before that "powerless dictator " could spread its threat around the entire world.

But the leaders of the different world powers would not necessarily rejoice at having that problem removed. Quenser himself had almost been killed on the battlefield after getting involved in something similar in the past. Mariage had been in a safe country, so a different method had been used.

And she now spoke through the vent while sounding on the verge of tears.

"What is your point? D-don't tell me they've sent an assassin after me now. That would just be too much. I'm already being punished by spending the rest of my life in this horrible place."

"That's not why I'm here," spat out Quenser. "I want your help, so I'll be breaking you out of this prison that doesn't even have the moral decency to separate the men from the women. In exchange, I want you to work with me to find a certain Object's weakness. This New Model is a fully submerged type that was secretly constructed by the Capitalist Corporations' Island Nation. It's known as the Megalodiver."

Mariage Nightcap was solely in charge of ideas. She would not work to destroy the Object like Quenser and Heivia. She would not leave the boundaries of the "clean wars" where the finishing blow was left to another Object.

But she would still be useful.

She had ended a war without leaving her safe country, so in a way, she had made a much more clever choice than the two idiots.

The problem was how the fools at the top of the military judged her actions.

"W-wait a second. What is this New Model? I've been in here, so I don't know much about the outside world."

"Don't lie," insisted Quenser. He spoke loudly enough to be heard over the tropical rain. "You may look like a pitiable princess in a birdcage, but no prisoner in the world is more financially active than you. You get royalties from ebooks, advertising income from your blog, and you make financial transactions with that money. You even have private rooms you don't actually use at the London Stock Exchange and Wall Street. I don't know how you're gaining access from here, but you probably know more about the outside world than me. Especially when it comes to suspicious actions related to Objects."

"…"

"I took a look at your data and your trade records are way in the red. To be blunt, a safe country housewife trading in her spare time would do better. You may just be addicted to it like the people who are obsessed with horseracing or casinos and love using the money more than whether they actually win. But then how are you making up for all those losses? This is just speculation , but I think you're anonymously selling information to the military. Like how to defeat supposedly undefeatable Objects." Quenser quietly continued. "If so, this is no time to be picky. I want you to hand over all the data you have on the Megalodiver and to lend us your brains until it's been destroyed."

"And my reward is being freed from this ridiculous prison?"

"By the way, it seems Cambridge's chancellor is a sensible guy. He's willing to treat you as having taken a temporary leave of absence, so you can start back up right where you left off. You can't get much better than that."

"But will this really work? The security here is super strict."

"I'm not planning to tunnel out with a spoon or anything," spat back Quenser. "The military is willing to use its tax money to bring an end to the nobles' fun. I have the military on my side, so we won't be sneaking out through a hole. We'll blow up the prison and have a triumphant return."

Quenser fell silent for a moment and continued in a troubled tone.

"If we don't, our princess will be destroyed by the Megalodiver. We need to find a way to defeat it before that happens."

"Um, where are we supposed to start?"

"We have time until the operation begins. Rather than waste it, let's talk. It'll help to hear from someone who's directly dealt with the Megalodiver, right?"

Part 3

Mission Report A-02

March 17 – 1300 Hours

Ocean of the Far West Pacific District – Lifeboat

The weather was perfect.

Unfortunately, it was mid-March, so it only felt a little warm even with the sun high in the clear sky. The wind felt chilly on the two idiots' cheeks.

"Um, is this called the Far West Pacific District because it's the farthest west portion of the Far East's part of the Pacific? So does this count as west or east!?"

"This is when you spin the globe. Everywhere is connected and we're all friends. If we could only think like that, the world would be a happier place."

"When did you become a creepy hippie? You aren't smoking something funny-smelling are you?"

"We'll never be done with war if you assume anyone against it is a crazy junkie."

"Come to think of it, aren't you using war to profit? I'm trying to gain the valiant deeds needed to inherit my family and you're trying to get richer than a lower-level noble as an Object designer. We should be giving a toast to these clean wars."

A single small lifeboat floated on the cold sea that Pacific tuna fishing boats travelled through.

But this was not because the Scarlet Princess had been sunk.

Quenser and Heivia wore solid, metal diving suits that were much thicker than the rubber ones they had used when attacking the Ame-no-Darin. While the others had looked like formfitting wetsuits, these looked more like huge robots. The upside-down bucket helmets were placed next to them.

"This feels like round and awkward armor. You'd never see anything like this in an action movie or a robot anime."

"These convenient things let us dive as much as we want without worrying about decompression," said Quenser. "I will admit this design would never sell as a toy, though. This is a good example of what happens when you only focus on functionality."

"I can't believe this," said Heivia in annoyance. "Are they seriously sending flesh-and-blood humans up against an opponent the princess can't beat in a straight fight? Maybe I should take out a life insurance policy."

"We can't beat it in a straight fight, so we're trying to find a weak point," spat out Quenser. "But that's difficult when it's staying 1500 meters below the surface. We need to sneak up to it and sabotage it in some way."

"Isn't it a bit reckless to try destroying this deep sea fish's gills to make it come to the surface?"

"Object cannons and nuclear torpedoes won't work on this thing, so if we don't destroy it here, this New Model's empire will cover 70% of the planet. And I can't think of any other way of doing this."

"This isn't a job for a student studying design or a sexy noble radar analyst. We're not a panacea or a Swiss army knife. If they're giving this job to us like some kind of punishment, it means the actual frogmen all refused, doesn't it!? This has got to be dangerous!!"

"Frolaytia really likes using us as her final trump card, so our only option is to accept this with a positive attitude. She is our commanding officer, after all."

With that offhand command, Quenser picked up his helmet that looked like a metal bucket with a round window on it. Unfortunately, he could not put it on himself. He put it on his head and Heivia spun eight screw-like devices to completely fasten it to the neck.

Once that was complete, Quenser fastened Heivia's helmet.

From this point on, they spoke over the radio.

"This system circulates the air I breathe out after purifying it with caustic soda, right? I can't believe it. They've filled a diving

suit with a chemical that produces a toxic gas on contact with water."

"It can't be helped. With a normal oxygen tank, your exhaled air leaks out as air bubbles. The New Model supposedly tells friend from foe by acoustic signature. If it detected a diver of unknown affiliation, it'd shoot its lasers."

"I understand the reasoning, but caustic soda is treated as a hazardous substance!"

"It's used in the Baby Magnum's closed circulation system, so we'll be fine."

"You need to stop trusting that Object so damn much! Plus, that thing is protected by armor that can withstand a nuke. For us, the unit is completely exposed! It could rupture from a wave knocking us into a reef!!"

While Heivia held an underwater rifle and Quenser held a bag filled with tools, they sat on the edge of the lifeboat with their backs to the ocean.

Quenser then asked an elementary question.

"What do we do now?"

"You don't need to think about anything. Just let yourself fall backwards to dive in head-first. Make a nice tumble like this is a slapstick skit. You are always the one in charge of comedy."

"Eh? Eh? Backwards? Upside down!? That's too scary! I can't do it! I can only see forward with this helmet!!"

"Horizontal chop!!"

Fed up of waiting, Heivia hit Quenser near the neck.

After Quenser flipped backwards in surprise and sank into the water with a splash, Heivia tumbled backwards to dive in as well.

Quenser flailed his arms and legs as he began sinking down.

"I'm sinking! I'm sinking like crazy! I'm not floating at all!!"

"The New Model is 1500 meters down!! And you're wearing a metal suit. You aren't going to float unless you fill it with air like a balloon, but that's our ticket home. And you're the one that said we'd get laser beamed if we dived down while making bubbles everywhere!!"

On the way there, they had to dive in complete silence and then they had to damage the New Model in some way. After causing it to malfunction and make an emergency trip to the surface, they would use the power of air to float up to the surface themselves. That was the general plan.

Simply put, if they failed to damage it, they would lose their chance to float back up.

If it was fully functioning and they tried to escape to the surface using air, it would detect them and fire its laser beams.

This was why the frogmen in charge of underwater combat had all refused.

Just because they were ocean specialists did not mean they wanted to slowly die on the dark and cold ocean floor.

"We can somewhat adjust our descent speed by reducing the number of weights wrapped around our waists. If we sink too fast, the seawater passing through the grooves at our joints could create air bubbles. It couldn't hurt to lighten up a bit."

"Wh-what if we want to descend faster?"

"Weren't you listening during training!? You find a rock or something else to act as a weight and you tie it to your waist!!"

In the shallower portion of the ocean, they saw the mysterious scenery of schools of fish swimming around like a single large creature. It looked like something from a TV documentary. The thick diving suits kept the cold of the ocean out, but Quenser could not enjoy the scene because the feeling of sinking no matter what he did brought instinctual fear. He felt like he had fallen victim to mafia justice and had been thrown off a pier with concrete solidified around his feet.

On the other hand, Heivia seemed perfectly calm.

He tended to be skilled at everything but left little impression, so he could be called a jack of all trades.

"You can panic if you want, but you'll just make yourself suffer later. Piss yourself now and you'll be in for a self-made hell. And you'll probably be forced to purchase the diving suit. It's military, so it'll be stupidly expensive."

"I don't like anything I've heard about this! And this air has an unhealthy chemical smell!"

"I told you it uses hazardous caustic soda for the circulation, didn't I!? We're doing the exact opposite of being health freaks! Open your eyes, you idiot!!"

After diving 100 meters, the surface was no longer visible up above.

After diving 200 meters, the area was only dimly lit as if by a dialed-down lamp.

This brought confusion to Quenser's mind independent of the fear of sinking.

"The sunlight isn't reaching us anymore. I feel like we're being closed inside a giant sarcophagus."

"We kind of are. The weight pressing down from above is way heavier than those desert pyramids. And it's darker and colder here than in an ancient burial ground."

This was a different world.

And that world seemed to take clear form and open its giant maw to swallow them whole.

Their diving suits had powerful lights on the heads, but that was not enough to wipe away the darkness. The thick darkness always lurked just outside the circle of light.

"We've still got a ways to go. Once the deep sea fish start floating around us, we'll be getting close. I hate this. If only we could fast-forward or take a meal break."

"I don't even feel like complaining anymore."

"What's this? Are you actually claustrophobic?"

"I think I might be after this!"

That boring but taxing work continued on and on.

The New Model searched for its targets using acoustic signatures. They had already confirmed that using a few unmanned submarines using different propulsion methods. They had all been destroyed in the end, but there had been large differences in how long until they were detected.

To be completely clear, an acoustic signature was something like a fingerprint of sound.

The sounds ships made cutting through the water or propellers and water jets made whipping up the water was subtly different from one ship to another. If that pattern was recorded, enemy could be distinguished from ally just by listening.

The New Model had recorded all its allied acoustic signatures.

It gathered all the sounds around it and anything not in its database was attacked as an enemy. It did not distinguish between military vessels and merchant ships. It created a devilish region of ocean to ensure its safety.

It had no eyes, but its ears were frighteningly sharp.

Quenser and Heivia did not need to worry about any light sources, so they kept their lights on as they descended into the dark ocean.

"All the unmanned subs were taken out, so will we really be okay? We're wearing these robot-like diving suits, after all."

"The joints are covered in artificial cartilage and silencing rubber, so they shouldn't make any clacking noises unless we force the arms and legs past the limits of their movement range."

"Yeah, but only in theory! The air circulation using caustic soda and the joint silencing are both improvised and handmade alterations made to our existing diving suits. None of this has been tested!!"

Their lights illuminated something that looked like white snow. They were clumps of dead plankton that had not fully decomposed. In the extreme long run, they would become the source of oil, so they were resources rather than garbage.

"There's not much life here. Is this an ocean of death that has no oxygen?"

"There's a submarine volcano here, right? It might be related to that something-or-other sulfide. Y'know, the stuff people in safe countries mix with cleaners to commit suicide."

"Hey, wait a second. Are we being washed away?"

"You don't even know about currents? That's from elementary school science."

"But what do we do if we're washed away!? 1500 meters is on the level of a world record. If we fall into a valley, the water pressure will crush us!!"

"Would you rather land on top of the Object or the volcano? Either one would kill us right away."

Their chatting gradually faded away as they continued diving.

Quenser felt like his very existence was being slowly buried. He had been placed in a coffin while still alive and dirt was being placed over it, bit by bit. Before long, the hole had been completely filled and no one on the surface would know where the boy named Quenser was.

It felt like he was sinking for all eternity.

As the weight bearing down from above increased, he could feel the soft emotions inside him slowly being carved away.

The wavering in his eyes vanished.

He stared at a single point and continued descending.

His sense of time had been warped, so he could not tell if half an hour or hours upon hours had passed once he finally saw some vague light flashing directly below.

The light was pure white.

Their own lights were being reflected off of the ocean bottom which was covered in fine sand.

"I can see the bottom of the ocean."

"Are you sure it's not the bottom of hell?"

Heivia gently landed on both feet and Quenser landed on his back.

"Ugh. Stop watching and help me up."

"Our joints may be covered in silencing rubber, but we'd be in trouble if we hit any other parts together. The manmade noise would call the New Model over right away."

After some struggling, Quenser somehow managed to stand up on his own. He had tossed up an unnecessary amount of sand.

"So where is the New Model?"

"It looks like we were swept five or six hundred meters west, so it's not too far to walk."

Their vision was limited to their lights as they walked slowly along the dark ocean bottom.

They felt the same floating sensation as someone walking on the moon.

A large shadow passed by overhead. Quenser assumed the twisting motion came from a deep sea fish, but he was left speechless when he looked up.

"What is that?" asked Heivia in confusion. "It's a fish robot. Is it a new kind of torpedo?"

The fish's body was divided into twenty or thirty pieces and each one used wave-like motions to simulate the movement of a fish. It had no propulsion devices such as a propeller or water jet.

But that was not the most interesting thing.

"It has something like a blade instead of a head. It's a piece of metal that looks like a long U."

"That's a tuning fork. It must resonate with the tiny sounds traveling through the ocean and send the information to the New

Model's ears. The Object must scatter these tuning fork torpedoes over a wide area to distinguish sounds from multiple angles."

Once they knew what it was, an unpleasant sweat and heat seemed to fill their thick diving suits.

It was the same as walking confidently along supposedly safe ground and later learning it was actually filled with landmines.

Even so, they had to continue on.

If the enemy's detection outdid their countermeasures, they would have been shot by laser beams long ago, so there was no point in frantically stopping now. Their survival meant they could continue walking along the ocean surface.

While telling themselves that as an optimistic self-suggestion, they continued walking.

After a while, they saw some faint light.

This was clearly different from the previous reflections. It was on a much larger scale and the light was less uniform. The level of brightness changed with time.

"Look. You can see some orange light."

"That isn't the New Model, is it?"

"That'd be the volcano, but if our intel is correct, that means the New Model is lurking nearby."

This volcano did not have the same tall triangular silhouette as one on land. It looked more like orange magma was showing from deep down in cracks on the ocean floor.

They had seen a ton of dead plankton while diving, but down here, they could see crabs and deep sea fish floating about.

"These might be special species that live off of sulfur instead of oxygen. It's said they might be able to function on the moon or Mars."

As they relied on their lights and continued on, they finally saw the real threat.

A black form rose up like a giant mountain.

They saw its silhouette with the orange light behind it.

"There it is."

"Yeah." Quenser gulped. "That's the New Model."

Part 4

Mission Report B-02

March 21 – 2230 Hours

Legitimacy Kingdom New Caledonia District – Special Political Prison "Château de Rouge"

While imprisoned in his container cell, Quenser peered out at the outside world using the long slit for food trays.

It was still pouring rain outside and the Object that had brought him was gone.

The prison was a giant jungle gym. The passageways had wire mesh floors and metal pipe railings. There were occasional barriers and metal bars. The layout was made to ensure a wide view, but that meant the passageways had no ceilings and the rain could get in.

Guards carrying guns with lights attached would walk along the wet passageways at uneven intervals. They most likely randomized their patrol patterns so the prisoners could not predict them. Either due to the rain or the heat, the guards looked displeased inside their raincoat hoods.

Their guns resembled assault rifles, but they were different.

The magazines were oddly thick and the barrel was cut short.

"What are those? They're not carbines, are they?"

"Euhh… You don't know? They're known as Don Chicago Can Openers."

"Oh, so they're full-auto shotguns."

That model was known more for its use in crime-filled safe countries than in battlefield countries. The mafia had acquired the

military models and swapped out the ammunition for powerful slugs, which gave them the destructive power to slice apart a bulletproof luxury car at close range. They had become notorious during their use in the abductions of several political VIPs who were cracking down on drugs. It was infamous enough that even a student like Quenser was familiar with it despite knowing little of wars and guns.

"But they wouldn't be using slugs. They're either using normal shotgun rounds or rubber riot-control rounds."

"H-how can you know that? They wouldn't obey regulations out of concern for us."

"The one thing jailers fear most is a riot. If a prisoner steals their weapon, it'll be turned against them. If the enemy got their hands on one of those 'can openers', they could tear through the emergency barriers and incapacitate the jailers' break system. They wouldn't let that happen."

Quenser looked away from the slit and approached the ventilation fan again.

"More importantly, what did you think of the story I told you? Any thoughts at this point?"

"Well," began Mariage Nightcap's quiet voice. "If the Megalodiver really does locate its target with acoustic signatures, you might be able to use that. For example, you could play a pre recorded Island Nation acoustic signature with a speaker or detonate a decoy torpedo to mask your own acoustic signature."

"We tried that with the unmanned subs. It bought some time, but they were still all located and destroyed with laser beams. Also , there's no way to hide something as large and noisy as an Object. "

"Yeah… But it might help to eject buoys with speakers to assist evasion a lot like chaff or flares."

That could work.

Quenser was a bit annoyed at having nothing to take notes with , but then Mariage asked a question.

"U-um, so how are we going to get out of here?"

"As I said before, I won't be doing it alone. The military will be taking official action, so there's nothing to worry about."

"But I'll worry if I don't know the details."

"It's simple. First, a virus is sent into the prison from outside and that takes control of the entire facility's control system."

"Oh, and that opens the locks on all the containers so everyone can move, right?"

"No. It locks everything down to trap everyone where they are. " Quenser readily rejected her opinion. "The prison will be attacked by heliborne troops, but the jailors might take prisoners

hostage if they start to lose. Some might even decide to take the prisoners into death with them. Our top priority is protecting people's lives from that kind of desperate last stand."

All the containers would be locked down so not even the jailers could open them. Then the attack helicopters would attack from the air and transport helicopters would lower soldiers to suppress the jailers. Only then would the containers be opened.

"The Don Chicago Can Openers worry me a bit, but as I said, I doubt the jailers will be carrying around excessive firepower. Normal shotgun rounds and rubber rounds aren't enough to break into the container cells. …Anyway, there isn't anything in particular we have to do. We aren't tunneling out with a spoon or scraping a fork down on the wall until it can work as a screwdriver . We just have to wait for the heavily armed soldiers to end it for us."

Quenser heard a sound as a jailer passed by in front of the door.

He knew the jailer could not hear him, but he still fell silent.

After making sure the footsteps had left, he opened his mouth again.

"Okay. Next I'll tell you about when we actually came into contact with the Megalodiver."

Part 5

Mission Report A-03

March 17 – 1700 Hours

Ocean of the Far West Pacific District – 1500 Meters Deep

While wearing thick diving suits, Quenser and Heivia slowly walked along the fine sand as if walking on the moon.

The submarine volcano did not take the form of a towering mountain. Instead, an orange glow came from deep within the giant cracks on the ocean floor. They did not want to approach those cracks because being boiled to death inside their robot-like suits did not sound like fun.

A mass of metal towered above them.

It was an Object.

Specifically, it was the New Model developed in secret by the Island Nation.

"Hey, what do we do? Risking our lives to approach is fine and all, but how do we find a weakness on this monster!?"

"Shouting at it isn't going to make one pop out at us. We need to stick to the basics. Let's circle around it to observe the whole thing. We can think after that."

Quenser saw a few distinguishing features while just looking up at it from the one side.

Just like an Object that fought on the ocean surface, it had a round float on the bottom. But this Object was primarily meant to travel underwater, so its purpose was not entirely clear. It was likely more than just an emergency float.

It had a single main cannon which rose up from the very top. The spherical main body was held between two giant pillars that rose up from the circular float below the Object.

"Is the spherical main body made to rotate up and down? That lets it target enemies directly above and directly in front."

The two of them began slowly moving clockwise around the Object.

This New Model completely relied on sound. It did not react at all as they shined light directly on it. However, that made them afraid of their own footsteps. They had no idea how accurately it

could distinguish sounds, so they felt the same pressure as someone walking blindfolded through a minefield.

"What the hell? It's got a ton of secondary cannons, but they're all on the float. It looks like some kind of horrible flower."

"The spherical body rotates, remember? If it had small cannons all over it like a sea urchin, they'd almost certainly interfere with something."

It made sense, but it seemed the New Model had been designed with the main cannon being its primary means of attack.

And it was meant to unilaterally attack Objects on the surface rather than something else in the ocean.

"Its direct combat ability might not be all that great. Then again, it might be too much to expect mixed martial artist footwork in the intense resistance of the ocean water."

"So what? Thanks to the changing layers of heat created by the volcano, our lasers are bent and metal shells can't reach it. Not even a nuclear torpedo or mine will work. It may just be sitting here, but we have no effective way of attacking it. I'd be proud too."

"…"

Quenser silently thought as they continued circling the New Model.

Eventually, they arrived directly behind it.

"Is this its propulsion device?"

A giant circular part was pressed against the back of the spherical main body while supported by a few pillars. That circular part had two pairs of wing-like parts extending from it.

Quenser saw countless holes on the wing-like parts. They resembled the heat radiation cover on an autocannon.

"This is a water jet. It takes in a ton of water and ejects it with enough pressure to propel itself forward."

"What does it matter!? Whether it has that, a propeller, or an electromagnetic method, we still can't destroy the sturdy parts used!!"

"Don't be so sure."

Quenser shined his light around again.

He observed the objects floating in the water.

"Look, Heivia."

"What? There's not gonna be a bikini girl this deep in the ocean. Or did you spot a mermaid?"

"It's a deep sea fish. A real ugly one," replied Quenser seriously . "There's an optimal environment for them. They live near the volcano, so they must need warm seawater to live. But doesn't this one's movement look weird?"

"What?"

"This one's left the volcano and started swimming around the Object."

Quenser pointed it out.

Heivia finally looked up and began observing the deep sea fishes' movements.

"What's going on? Is it gathering the heat of the volcano cause it 's made of metal?"

"I have a more interesting theory." Quenser sounded excited. " The New Model takes in the seawater, but not for its water jet propulsion. It uses water cooling. In other words, it takes in cold water and passes it through metal pipes in order to cool the neighboring reactor and regulate the temperature elsewhere."

In other words…

"Let's find where it takes in the water. If we cover it with a plastic sheet or something, we might be able to take out the water jet propulsion and the reactor cooling."

Part 6

Mission Report B-03

March 21 – 2300 Hours

Legitimacy Kingdom New Caledonia District – Special Political Prison "Château de Rouge"

"It's about time," muttered Quenser. "We're leaving, so get ready."

"Wh-what!? Wh-why?"

"I said a military unit was coming in after a virus was sent in to take over the prison's system, right? There's a piece missing before that can happen. The facility's core isn't connected to the outside, so we have to manually mess with the wiring."

"B-but, um, get out…? Heh…eh heh heh. The cells are locked from the outside."

"There's a slot in the door to receive food. We can get metal parts and wires by dismantling the hand washer and toilet. That just leaves picking the lock. If you bend a fairly long wire, you can stick it in the keyhole directly above the food slot."

He got down to work as he spoke.

After a heavy click, the lock's deadbolt released.

"E-eee!? I-it only took you thirty seconds? A-and I thought these were electronic locks."

"I didn't release the lock; I destroyed the internal components. There are rumors that the developer intentionally left this

vulnerability. We ordered an identical lock and I spent two or three days learning how to do this. I couldn't open any other lock."

He took a step outside his container cell.

As soon as he did, his head was covered in a downpour of rain as warm as human blood. Either due to the salt water or the metal, an odd raw smell rose up from below.

If he was discovered, he was dead.

That simple fact gradually entered the tips of his fingers and toes and spread to the core of his body.

But standing still would not help, so he adjusted his grip on the wire and opened Mariage's cell as well.

"Let's go!"

"W-wait, wait!? Th-they have surveillance cameras outside!!"

"Messing with the camera here was the most they could do. The rest is up to us! We have to connect the line!! Unless we take control of the prison's system, the unit outside can't move in!!"

He mercilessly pulled her from the cell.

Mariage was a girl with an unbalanced build. She was short yet had large breasts. Her glasses looked like they would slip down at any moment and tears were welling up in her eyes that looked like those of a small animal. She wore the prisoner's uniform of a thick jumpsuit with no pockets to hide anything in, but hers was baggy

and did not suit her at all. It seemed to implicitly state how unfortunate her circumstances were.

He dragged her on and whispered to her while the blood-warm rain washed over them.

"Guide me to the third watchtower."

"Eh? Eh? B-but if you're going to mess with the communication wiring, you would need to go to the security server in the center-…"

"If we went straight there, they'd catch us right away. Instead, we'll cut the wiring somewhere less secure and reconnect it. Now hurry."

"W-will we really be okay?"

"I'm not an expert in undercover operations or infiltrations. This is a job even a student can handle, so don't worry."

The prison was a large birdcage. The walls, floors, and everything else were all made from metal pipes and wire mesh, so there were plenty of gaps too small for a human to pass through. There were no absolute blind spots.

However…

"They may have left their vision wide open, but they only point the lights straight forward. That's because they don't want to look

up and have the rain cover their faces. After all, this isn't any old rainwater. This is the filth that's passed through the floors the other jailers have stepped on."

"A-and they can't tell a jailor from a prisoner if they're walking in the dark?"

"They think the surveillance cameras are working properly, so they'll assume everything is okay until they hear something from them. As long as we don't press against the walls or crawl around, they won't catch on."

Quenser was of course not a specialist. He was giving all this knowledge secondhand.

"B-but won't it seem weird that we're walking together? And we don't have lights or guns."

"They can't tell if we have guns or not in the dark."

"And the lights?"

"I have a suggestion concerning that. Mariage, grab onto me."

"What!?"

"This prison has no morals, so there have got to be jailors who go have some fun together during their patrols. There's no other entertainment here. In the worst case, there might even be relationships between jailors and prisoners. At any rate, we can make it so the other jailers make their own assumptions about why we don't have a light on."

"U-ugh… I'm not seeing much of an upside in this for me…"

Despite her comment, Mariage did as Quenser asked.

Quenser had assumed she would simply grab onto his hand, but she went further.

"Wait! Ah! Why are you embracing me like that!? And why would you rub your cheek against me!?"

"Eh? But…"

"W-well, if you're fine with it, I won't argue."

Quenser walked on while almost dragging her along with him.

The soft sensation sent a tingling along his spine, but he was also concerned going this far would make them stand out more.

But none of the other guards shouted any warnings their way.

It seemed he had been right in saying the place had no morals.

"Honestly. This rain is horrible. I guess that's what you get with a tropical area."

"U-um… I think this is probably due to a meteorological weapon."

"So it's artificially created rain? But why? Is there a huge plantation on a nearby island or something?"

"No, the rain is unwanted. It's apparently a way of avoiding natural disasters by scattering the rain to other places before flooding occurs."

(I'm more afraid of the lightning.)

Quenser kept that thought to himself.

If that light illuminated them like a camera flash, the jailers might notice the truth. As long as no one was watching in that instant, they would be fine, but there was no 100% guarantee.

But as there was no way of resolving that issue, there was no point in telling Mariage. It might even make her refuse to cooperate and that would 100% guarantee their failure.

"Anyway…"

Mariage began to speak as she led the way to the base of the third watchtower (and pressed up against Quenser).

He could feel her quickened pulse through her chest. She seemed to be desperately trying to suppress her anxiety. Given the depressing "legends" of the prison, that was not surprising.

"One thing bothers me. If the Object itself emits a lot of heat, why did the Megalodiver hide in the zone of altered temperature around the submarine volcano? It could have scattered hot water around itself to create that mirage-like anti-laser wall."

She was clever.

Without seeing it for herself, she had accurately found the question needing answering.

"We have a number of theories concerning that."

"Like that it wanted to prioritize controlling the reactor's temperature and thus wanted to avoid letting the situation adjust the amount of emitted hot water?"

"Or that it was using the two different types of hot water to construct a more complex and difficult to analyze temperature difference."

Quenser was unsure what expression to give as he noticed the sweet scent coming from Mariage's hair, so he simply continued down the walkway she indicated.

As expected, there were no metal bar barriers on the way to the third watchtower, so they would not have to attack a jailor from behind and swipe the key.

The smell of the rain and the smell of iron vaguely mixed together. It may have been coming from the wire mesh floor or the metal pipe railings, but he had no guarantee it was actually the metal he was smelling. In a place like this, other possibilities presented themselves.

"To sum it up, we never found a part that seemed to handle water intake. We're assuming there was a hole on the top we

couldn't see from below or it has a mechanism to open the armor when it needs to take in seawater. We're guessing the former because it should be constantly circulating seawater."

"And Objects' are meant to be sturdy. You would either hide the water intake because it would take damage if attacked while exposed or you would design it to withstand a nuclear attack even while exposed. If I was designing it, I would choose the latter." She trembled a bit and strengthened her grip on Quenser, but she finally continued. "Putting the water intake on the top might be to prevent it from mistakenly taking in sand from the ocean floor."

"It's possible, but there were deep sea fish gathered around it and it didn't have any trouble from mistakenly taking in a small fish."

"Well, it is an Object."

"That it is."

They continued pleasantly speaking for a while, but then Mariage asked a question as if she had only just remembered.

"U-um… Then what did you do?"

"A bit of sand or a deep sea fish wasn't enough to block the intake and we hadn't brought anything like a large plastic sheet with us. Not that we could have placed one on top of a fifty meter Object even if we had. The sound of air bubbles when we used the air to surface would have likely given us away, and we would have been heard climbing up the spherical body in our thick

diving suits. There was no way to reach the water intake on the top .”

“No, no, no, no ,no…”

Mariage Nightcap seemed to be panicking just from hearing the story.

“Th-there was nothing you could do.”

“But we had to do something.” Quenser let out a short breath as he walked. “And there was one ‘material’ we could use to block up the New Model’s water intake.”

Part 7

Mission Report A-04

March 17 – 1740 Hours

Ocean of the Far West Pacific District – 1500 Meters Deep

Heivia switched to camera mode and observed the seawater. He checked the temperature at the spot where the cold water of the deep sea mixed with the water warmed by the submarine volcano.

“Wow, this is hopeless. It’s got a great marble pattern going. A supercomputer might be able to analyze it, but it would probably take a while. Can it even get this complex naturally?”

"The New Model could be gently stirring up the water with its water jets or ejecting the hot water from its reactor cooling into the hot water from the volcano. At any rate, it could easily be helping it along."

"Whatever the case, it'll bend an Object's laser beams. If it won't fly straight, you can't hit."

Even from 1500 meters deep, they had a way of communicating with the fleet on the surface. If they requested assistance from the Baby Magnum, it would fire laser beams at the locations they gave.

But those beams would not hit like this.

And since they could not predict where they would ultimately hit, there was a risk of them hitting the two idiots who gave the location.

"There are two important points here," summed up Quenser. " First, we haven't found a way to defeat the New Model. We might be able to manage if we blocked up the water intake used for both the reactor cooling and the water jet propulsion, but with the equipment available to us, we have no way of getting up on top of it without it noticing. We would have to climb fifty meters while wearing these heavy masses of metal."

"Wait. That's the only important point here. What's the other one?"

"The volcano," concisely answered Quenser. "The Object might be interfering, but it's definitely hiding in the zone of altered

temperature created by the volcano, right? If we could seal off that volcano, it can't maintain that temperature shield on its own."

"Seal it…?"

Heivia was at a loss for words.

Quenser had a feeling the other boy did a double take through his thick helmet.

"Are you stupid? No, really! Are you stupid!? That's a spring of 1500 degree lava and you think we can put something over it to plug it up!? A plastic sheet isn't gonna cut it!!"

"Hypothetically, would a destroyed Object work? It did destroy a few Objects before the princess arrived, right? If we let them sink to the bottom of the ocean, don't you think they would work to plug it up? And it doesn't matter if it notices partway through and fires its laser beams. The giant mass just has to fall on top of the volcano in the end."

"Those things are filled with valuable tech. No one's gonna agree to that."

"Then gypsum."

"…?"

"When they melt down soft iron at the ironworks, they use a giant bucket made from hardened gypsum. That means it can withstand the heat of molten rock. Even with a burner, it will only grow red instead of burning or melting. If we prepared a hunk of it

the size of a warship and dropped it into the ocean, it could cover the volcano."

"That's a wonderful idea, Quenser." Heivia sounded annoyed. "Now, how many days would it take to create 300 meters of calcined gypsum and then carry it out into the Pacific? They can't just throw it into a gigantic furnace, so they'd have to make it in small bricks and put it together. Even if we're using a caustic soda circulation system instead of an oxygen tank, we can't last down here for three months."

"I had a feeling it wouldn't work. And even if we already had the gypsum, the New Model's lasers would slice it to pieces on the way down."

Quenser looked up in irritation.

He could not see the sky beyond the transparent seawater. The pitch black darkness made it look like he was buried alive below thick bedrock.

"That leaves only one option."

"Hm? Why are you acting all self-important? You make it sound like you have an idea you'd rather not use."

"We have the volcano." Quenser pointed his thumb toward the orange light. "We can have the princess blow it away with her laser beams. If an explosion blasts the lava everywhere, it'll cover the New Model while it sits there. Wherever the water intake might be, it'll be plugged if we cover the entire thing in lava."

"That's even worse than I was expecting!! Y-you really are an idiot!! We're here too, remember!? If you send out enough lava to cover a fifty meter machine, we'll meet a fate worse than a shrimp going into gratin!!"

"C'mon, Heivia."

"Eh? What? What's with that look of pity? N-no! I'm not stupid! I was using common sense to stop you from being stupid!!"

"We'd be contacting the princess via radio to have her attack, so we can just leave the area beforehand."

"I-I knew that!! I did!! I told you to stop looking at me in pity!!"

Heivia very nearly grabbed at Quenser, but their thick diving suits could cause a dangerous noise if they struck together and doing that right in front of the New Model would be suicide.

While separated by such a thick wall of water, even their long-range communications were cut off. If a submarine was going to use its radio, it would send a wired buoy to the surface and use it as an antenna.

"I can't believe this." Heivia sounded annoyed. "They catch fish , stick a relay antenna in their stomachs, and let them loose, right? And they have these marine antennae every three to five hundred meters?"

"It's the same as embedding a locator chip in an endangered species. The tech is even available to civilians. If you choose

species that stick to their turf instead of migratory ones, it's perfect ."

"I can't tell if we're protecting them or abusing them."

Quenser and Heivia hesitantly turned their lights toward the New Model, but its cannons only moved a bit and it showed no sign of attacking that kind of antenna. It seemed to truly focus only on the artificial noises of propellers and clacking.

Quenser began wondering if a rugby ball sized nuclear mine stuffed inside a large deep sea fish or giant squid's stomach would be enough to melt the surface of the New Model's armor, but he decided this was not the time to think about that.

"Anyway, let's move away from here."

"Hey, the temperature change will bend the lasers, right? Even if we ask to destroy the volcano, can the princess even hit?"

"She just has to keep firing until she does hit. And unlike with an Object, she doesn't have to be too accurate. She just needs to split open the ocean floor so a bunch of lava bursts out. It doesn't matter if the shots stray some."

They slowly walked across the fine sand of the pitch black ocean floor.

It felt like walking on the moon.

"One hundred meters is a long way."

"Don't you think this is far enough? I can't see the New Model anymore."

"And yet there's no cover around here."

"There's the dead plankton and the water itself isn't exactly clear. Anyway, let's just stop here. This soft sand is fine, but reaching an area of hard rock would be a bad idea. It might hear our feet clacking against it."

"Aren't we a little close?"

"No, we aren't!!"

They just had to attack the submarine volcano.

It sounded simple, but it would be a great risk for the princess.

The New Model would be targeting the Baby Magnum with laser beams the entire time while her attacks could not reach it. She would be exposing her defenseless self and firing everything she had until the volcano exploded.

"Firing a few shots sounds simple enough, but will it actually be that easy?" asked Heivia in annoyance. "After all, this is 1500 meters deep. She evades Object laser beams by analyzing the movements of the targeting lenses' subtle movements, but no one can see an Object this deep in the ocean. She has nothing to help her evade and she won't last long if she's leaving it all up to luck. She might even be hit with the very first shot."

"That's why we'll give her some help," suggested Quenser.

A muddy darkness filled the deep where no sunlight reached, but the dark silhouette of the New Model was visible in the volcano light like a piece missing from a jigsaw puzzle. Even the movements at the end of each cannon were visible.

"We can film the New Model the entire time. Even if we don't know what it means, the princess should be able to use the footage to determine what its main cannon is doing. We'll act as her eyes, Heivia."

"Dammit. So we're risking our lives either way? I thought we could leave everything to the princess."

"Remember. This is war."

After using several marine antennae to explain the situation via radio, they received an extremely displeased response from Frolaytia. That response can be summed up as follows: "I sent you to find a safe way of defeating the New Model, so why are you asking to expose our precious Baby Magnum to danger?" The original text had about 500% more military slang, but it is for the best to stick with this version.

"That huge-breasted commander isn't trying to use this mission to kill off her problem soldiers, is she?"

"Give it up, Heivia. Once that thought excites you, you finally reach the level of half a man."

At any rate, the princess and Frolaytia would not allow them to flee, so a suicidal fight was the only option if they could not find a weakness.

Frolaytia must have decided to use whatever ideas they had even if they were risky.

"Just to be clear, you did not coax me into doing this," she said. "This is the only time I will order an attack on an Object on the advice of individual soldiers."

"I think sending the two of us down here instead of the trained frogmen is even more unusual!! I'm an amateur student!!"

"Stop it, Quenser. Fight back too much and we'll be sent into space next time."

Quenser and Heivia had to wait until the time finally came.

As they watched from a distance, the edge of the New Model's silhouette moved slightly in the dim orange light of the volcano.

It must have already detected the movement of an Object on the surface because its upward-aimed main cannon began making slight adjustments.

The princess could not see those minute movements, but that also meant the New Model had no way of seeing the princess's small movements.

The water resistance prevented the New Model from making quick movements, so it had no way of evading its enemy's lasers. The temperature change barrier seemed to make it invincible at first glance, but it was also a desperate measure created out of necessity.

It had its advantages and disadvantages.

It was a double-edged sword.

But it had not reluctantly and desperately tried to make up for its weaknesses and flaws. It was designed with an awareness of those disadvantages and those disadvantages had been twisted into an even more honed and powerful advantage. Quenser did not know who had created it, but had the circumstances been different, he would have wanted to have a long chat with them. He felt he could learn a lot from them beyond simple technical skills.

"What's going on?" asked Heivia. "I can tell it's noticed the princess from the movement of its cannon, but it's letting her continue on instead of firing right away."

"The temperature change both protects it and bends its lasers. To target the princess, it has to leave its shield, so I think it's waiting for the perfect timing. It's worried about being hit by the princess's main cannon the instant it steps outside to shoot."

"So that's it. And it's invincible as long as it stays inside the area with the temperature change. It can search out sounds using those tuning fork torpedoes we saw, so it can take its time and aim over

the course of hours or days instead of going with the normal high-speed combat. I can see why it would become a coward. He's like a boring rookie who makes nothing but two pairs at a casino."

"But this time it's working in our favor."

An instant later, the promised time arrived.

An orange beam of light pierced through the water and ripped apart the darkness.

That was not the laser beam itself.

That afterimage created by dead plankton roasted in the laser beam's path burned into Quenser and Heivia's eyes. It felt less like their eyes hurt and more like their skull was splitting open, but they could not even rub their eyes due to the thick diving suits.

"Bhah!? Gah!!"

"What…? What is this, Quenser!? The area's bubbling up. That laser didn't boil the seawater, did it!?"

The sudden sound of bubbling caused the New Model's secondary cannons to begin moving around. It was searching the area. If it suspected the presence of a diver and fired a blind barrage, it could easily hit them on accident and waste all of their efforts.

"N-no… The seawater isn't perfectly clear, so the energy of the light might built up, but it should only boil along the line the laser passed through. It shouldn't make the entire area boil."

"Then what the hell is this!?"

Heivia's question was followed by a second laser beam falling from far overhead.

It struck surprisingly close by and a great mass of air bubbles filled their view.

"The laser beams aren't boiling the water."

They heard an unpleasant cracking noise from below their feet.

"It's the volcano!! The bedrock split open further away and the lava is about to come out from a new spot!!"

"…!?"

Orange light showed through.

They could no longer worry about appearances.

The two of them tried to move away as quickly as possible while with movements similar to someone walking on the moon. Heivia moved at full speed, but Quenser walked backwards. Heivia thought he was joking around, but it seemed he was actually continuing to film the movements of the New Model's main cannon with his camera. From 1500 meters up, the princess could not see the subtle movements of that weapon, so she could not evade.

"This is no time to be doing that! If that lava bursts up, we'll be completely melted! But first we'll be boiled to death by the water around us!! If I'm gonna take a bath in a hot spring, I want it to be with a beautiful woman!!"

"The New Model has begun to move. It's realized that the volcano creating its temperature barrier is crumbling! This is going to develop into a quick exchange of cannon fire. This camera footage is absolutely necessary!!"

"If we melt away while filming it, the princess will still lose her information, you idiot!!"

A low rumbling shook Quenser's gut.

After remaining motionless for so long, the New Model began smoothly crawling forward. Looking with the naked eye, its movement made little sense, but it had likely left the temperature shield.

The extreme high level laser shootout was beginning.

The flash of light left what Quenser could perceive and a thread of intense pain stretched from his eyes to his temples. This was enough light to cover up the laser beams the princess was firing down from above.

"Wh-what!? Shit, my eyes!!"

"We're 1500 meters deep. The princess's lasers were weakened on the way down, but the New Model's weren't. That's why this is hurting our eyes even more!!"

"Is that so!? And what's the point of filming this!? The screen's gonna be nothing but white!!"

"It's better than nothing. The princess is fighting a wild beast blindfolded and she's doing it for us!!"

The area the two of them had been waiting in a moment before had split wide open and orange glowing lava was spewing out.

It was much closer than they had thought and their plan had been for the lava to attack the New Model.

"That ain't good!! We're gonna be caught in the middle of it!!"

"Don't worry. It isn't falling this way!"

"Do you know how many thousands of degrees that is!? It'll boil the water in a matter of seconds! We need to get the hell out of here!!"

The way they walked like an astronaut on the moon was frustrating, but they continued on with very last ounce of strength they had.

The two steel monsters continued exchanging blasts with no concern for the puny humans.

Countless orange pillars of fire rose up.

The small ones were a few meters tall and the large ones were over one hundred meters tall.

Layer after layer of them cut off Quenser and Heivia's vision in an orange curtain. Even the giant silhouette of the New Model was swallowed up by the sea of flames. They saw deep sea fish fleeing once they could not endure the rapid temperature change. Once those fish started floating belly up, Quenser and Heivia's lives would truly be in danger.

"We can still make it! Don't give up!!"

"You can't trust your normal sense of pain, you idiot!! If a drop of lava gets on you, you won't feel the pain of a burn, but it'll damage your diving suit! Don't forget that even a millimeter hole is enough to kill you!"

They were only able to continue through rapidly heating seawater because of those thick diving suits, but they would not last forever. If the sea around them was truly boiling, the heat would reach the inside in just a few minutes.

Rather than simply being burned to death, they feared being cooked alive.

The caustic soda used to circulate their air was also a worry. Its melting point was over three hundred degrees, but they did not want to provoke it unnecessarily.

As Quenser persistently filmed the New Model with his helmet camera, Heivia wanted to grab his shoulders and drag him away. But if the metal of their two suits came into contact, it would dramatically raise the risk of the New Model detecting a manmade noise. That would lead to a threat far worse than the lava. That threat had a 100% possibility of death.

"Fall back, dammit! Fall back, you idiot!!"

The New Model was barely visible anymore.

The many pillars of fire and the air bubbles they created had created countless curtains covering their view.

They all of a sudden noticed that the laser fire from the ocean floor had stopped.

The princess's spears of light unilaterally swept across the ocean floor.

"What happened?"

Quenser spoke the question on his mind.

This was the same as darkness. He felt instinctual fear at not knowing the situation.

"What happened to the New Model!?"

Part 8

Mission Report B-04

March 21 – 2335 Hours

Legitimacy Kingdom New Caledonia District – Special Political Prison "Château de Rouge"

"Th-this is the third watchtower."

"Stand back. I'll do the work."

Quenser was reluctant to say goodbye to Mariage's softness and warmth, but he did not want to lose track of what mattered and be shot by the jailers.

He approached the watchtower alone and checked around carefully while the blood-like rain poured down on his head.

The watchtower itself was made up of countless metal pipes. This kept the jailers' view open, but it also exposed the wiring that would normally be hidden in the walls. It would not be difficult to rewire a few things.

"Sh-should you really be touching that?"

"As long as it isn't a high voltage power cable, I'll be fine. I just have to make sure I don't grab the wrong thing."

He selected a few communication cables and ripped off the plastic covering with his teeth. They were normal copper wires instead of fiber optic.

"How are you going to reconnect them?"

"This prison has updated its security system a few times and the old cables were left in place. You can even see the unused cables hanging right there. I can tear off pieces of them to make bypass lines."

"Wow… You're really good at this."

"Don't tell anyone, but I once messed with the insides of a slot machine back in my safe country. We all gathered our knowledge to take revenge against a cheating casino."

He had no tools, but he finished the work in no time.

He was like a fish given water.

"Done. Now the security server that manages the prison's closed system has an opening to the outside."

"Wh-what now? Do we return to our cells and wait?"

"No. Once the electronic simulation division detects the open line, the military will take action. We'll head somewhere where we won't be caught in the crossfire. We're supposed to meet up at the abandoned boat pier, so we can hide underneath it and wait for the retrieval unit."

"Ughh…"

"Please lead the way. I don't want to get lost after all this. … Don't worry. The military is fully supporting this attack. The prison can't hope to stand up to them when it comes to pure firepower. We only need to fear unpredictable stray bullets."

"Um, uh…"

"More importantly, have you figured anything out about the Megalodiver!? I've told you everything I have to tell you, including the plan to seal its water intake using the volcano's lava!! Is there anything else?"

"That's not it. Heh…eh heh heh…"

Quenser frowned.

(That's not it?)

Why was she rejecting what he had said? Why had she felt the need to end the conversation?

After coming this far, there was nothing else to do and it was not like she could have other plans, so why?

"U-um… I'm really sorry, Quenser."

He heard a footstep.

It was such a frightening noise that he hesitated to turn around.

(It can't be…)

He had a bad feeling about this.

He felt like he had made a faulty assumption at the very, very beginning and had only noticed after the theory was complete.

(It can't be!!)

"Quenser Barbotage."

He heard a voice, but it was not Mariage Nightcap's.

It was the deep male voice of a jailer and it came from directly behind him.

"How about we discuss this large-scale jailbreak that is supposed to occur tonight?"

A vise-like grip squeezed his shoulder and he was forcibly turned around.

He shouted out, but there was nothing he could do. Several men rushed up with the full-auto shotguns known as Don Chicago Can Openers. He had his back slammed into the wall and a shotgun barrel shoved into his mouth. Another man then beat the side of his head with another shotgun's stock. He felt like the roots of his teeth had bent. As he held his mouth and curled up, a rain of blows came from every direction.

His consciousness flashed in and out.

Partway through, he even forgot to remain balled up to protect his organs.

He was grabbed by the hair and thrown into a passageway that reeked of the salty wind.

All of the jailers looked the same to him, but one smiled and asked a question.

"Are you gonna talk or not?"

The man shoved his shotgun barrel under Quenser's jaw to force him to look up.

"Listen. Reality isn't like the movies. If I pull the trigger now, you won't die. Your face will be smashed to pieces and some of your brain's frontal lobe might splatter out, but you'll keep living. Do you want to see what that's like?"

"What…is she?" groaned Quenser with the taste of iron in his mouth. "Mariage Nightcap is a prisoner here… I thought that meant she was sent here for a crime she didn't commit."

"And so she hated being here?"

The man's smile deepened to something vulgar.

He violently grabbed the bespectacled and fainthearted-looking girl's arm, but she showed no sign of struggling or trying to run. In fact, she gave a stiff smile as the jailer embraced her shoulder.

"I…don't think this place is all that bad. I can write ebooks and trade stocks from here. Breaking me out would be a biiiit of a problem. Eh heh…eh heh heh…"

Quenser doubted that was what she actually thought.

Even the smile on her face was broken.

He did not know what kind of life she was being forced to live, but her own will had grown remarkably feeble.

Quenser himself had said the prison had no morals.

He had also said there might be relationships between jailers or even between jailers and prisoners.

"Did you give into them, NTR girl?"

"Don't say that," said the smiling and shotgun-wielding jailer. " Virgins are the easiest. When they've got something to protect, they'll do anything you say in exchange. She's even the one that suggested earning a little money from book royalties and stocks. She offered to give us a cut as long as we spared her that."

The smile on the man's face made it clear he was willing to kill for no good reason.

"Anyway, it looks like hacking into our system was the first stage of your plan, so we switched the entire facility to offline mode. The military likes surefire methods, so they'll call off the operation if it falls apart at the very beginning. That way they can search for a better method. Château de Rouge will fall eventually, but it isn't happening today. The cavalry isn't on the way to save you."

"…"

"Tell me what unit you belong to. We tame troublesome people for the nobles and royals' convenience, so we've got plenty of secret connections. We'll have them act on our behalf and take care of your commanding officer. And while all that's going on, we can escape. We'll be able to make a new secret prison soon enough. The nobles will never stop having their fun, after all."

Quenser slowly opened his mouth, but not because he had given into the jailer before his eyes.

The boy laughed and spoke to Mariage.

"Why do you think I was the one doing this?"

"What…?"

"I'm just a student. I've never even been properly trained to shoot a gun. The military has countless specialists in all sorts of

fields, so why do you think they left this to me instead of an infiltration expert? Doesn't make sense, does it!? Normally, a team of commandos from the intelligence division would have rescued you and then we could have talked at our leisure at a military base . That's the textbook path to success! But we didn't do that. The hardheaded military left the standard path. Why!? If you really are smarter than these guys, don't you find it strange!?"

Quenser was not from the intelligence division. It was out of the ordinary for him to be ordered on a mission needing high-level training in infiltration.

"Um…"

"Remember what I told you? Our enemy is a marine Object built in secret by the Island Nation. And it doesn't float on the ocean like normal. This second generation is made to submerge! And where is this prison built!? It's on the ocean, isn't it!?"

"You can't mean…"

Mariage gulped and Quenser shouted out despite the shotgun pressed against his jaw.

"It's after you!! It's trying to eliminate the 'monster' that might find a weakness in it!!"

As soon as he got the words out, the whole world was tossed about.

A tremendous vibration shook the entire facility that looked like a giant birdcage built on the ocean. Every single one of them was tossed along the passageway. Quenser used the confusion to kick the jaw of a jailor lying nearby.

"Due to the formal paperwork, it wasn't clear if the rescue operation would make it in time, so I was unofficially sent ahead!! That way I could get any information out of you before the Megalodiver could kill you!!"

One of the jailers grabbed a Don Chicago Can Opener while lying on the ground.

He shouted something, stood up, and tried to aim at Quenser, but then he stopped.

He seemed to be looking off into the distance.

His gaze was turned toward the dark ocean visible past the jungle gym-like third watchtower.

Quenser knew the name of the despair before the man's eyes. He had seen it himself in the past.

The boy sprang to his feet and tackled the confused Mariage Nightcap to the ground.

A moment later, a tremendous flash of light surged out and everything evaporated.

The laser beam fired by the New Model was just as thick as the third watchtower that acted as a pillar supporting the birdcage.

Everything melted into the color orange and scattered about: the metal watchtower, the passageways, the barriers blocking them off, and the jailers in charge of them.

"Run."

He was half-blinded and sharp pain assaulted his temples, but he did not have time to worry about it.

He grabbed Mariage's collar and forced her to her feet.

"We have to get out of here!! You may be a slut who gave into fear and surrendered your heart to the jailers, but you don't want to die with them, do you!? Then run!! That was its smallest anti personnel cannon. If it fires its main cannon, we'll be evaporated along with this part of the map!!"

"No, no, no, no, no…"

The two of them ran along the passageway and Mariage asked a question with tears in her eyes and while gasping for breath.

"What is that!? I thought you dealt with the Island Nation's New Model at the bottom of the ocean!"

"If it had ended that easily, we wouldn't need your help! We weren't good enough!!"

"B-but you said the Megalodiver was a submerged Objet! Why is it firing from the surface!?"

"We caused a certain amount of damage. It seems the water intake is used for the reactor cooling, the water jet propulsion, and the pilot Elite's oxygen supply. It creates oxygen from seawater using electrolysis!"

"What's your point!?"

"It seems to have a few different water intakes and we sealed the oxygen supply one with the lava."

The entire prison shook once more.

The container cells hanging down started to fall into the dark ocean. There was a living human in each and every one of them and they were all poor innocents who had earned the wrath of nobles or royals.

"In other words, it was able to keep fighting after surfacing! On the surface, it can take in air directly!!"

"But! But!! Wasn't its greatest selling point the way it neutralized all attacks by blocking metal shells with the thick layer of water and bending laser beams with the temperature change created by the volcano!? Can't another Object easily defeat it on the surface!?"

"We thought so, too!!"

Suddenly, the passageway itself fell. It tilted and the two of them tumbled down to a lower level like it was a slide.

"But it didn't work. Its true terror doesn't come from its ability to dive underwater."

Gravity vanished.

By the time they realized the entire prison was collapsing, it was all over.

Quenser and Mariage were thrown into the lukewarm southern ocean along with all the other prisoners.

Part 9

Mission Report A-05

March 17 – 1800 Hours

Ocean of the Far West Pacific District – 1500 Meters Deep

"Hey," muttered Heivia as he looked up. "It's going up. The New Model is surfacing! Was the lava attack that effective!?"

Quenser watched it as well.

"That isn't normal air. It must be using a special gas to get that kind of buoyancy. It also seems to be using its water jets for

attitude control. I don't think its reactor is on the verge of exploding or anything. It may have had another reason to take in water. Maybe it uses electrolysis for oxygen."

"I don't care why. If it's surfacing, we win! The thick wall of water and the temperature shield are gone. Our princess can't lose to that shut-in now that it's been stripped bare!!"

The New Model was surfacing quite quickly, so it had already disappeared from view.

That was a great difference from Quenser and Heivia who had to wear thick diving suits and spend hours descending. It would reach the surface in twenty or thirty minutes.

"What should we do?"

"Let's wait for the princess to defeat the New Model. I don't want to be killed by the last shot of an enemy we've already pretty much defeated."

After reporting that the New Model had begun to surface, the two of them began walking once more. Ferocious pillars of fire were still rising from the submarine volcano. They did not know how far they had to go to reach safety, but they did not want to remain where they were.

Nevertheless, they had both relaxed quite a bit.

Their job was complete.

They only had to wait for the princess to shoot her floating target. With its defense system gone, the New Model would be unable to keep up with the high-speed battle. It was a fish on the chopping block.

Or so they thought.

"Are you two still alive?"

After a while, they received a transmission from Frolaytia.

"What is it?"

"Did the princess finish off that irritating freshman? Oh, right. If she destroyed it, it'll sink down here again, won't it!? We need to watch out above!!"

"That isn't the issue."

Frolaytia's voice sounded somehow heavy and she continued before they could determine why.

"The Baby Magnum was badly damaged. I repeat, the Baby Magnum was badly damaged!! The princess just barely avoided being sunk, but she can't continue fighting. We are falling back in order to replace the equipment. If you're still alive, then play dead. This is its ocean now!!"

"You're…kidding…"

"W-wait a second!! But we did our job! The New Model specializes in fighting from underwater and we made it surface. It doesn't have its thick wall of water or temperature shield. Wasn't it just a metal drum rocking in the waves!?"

"It had more than that." Frolaytia's tone was bitter. "It was only looking down on its enemies like that because it viewed defeating the enemy unharmed to be the best option. You two woke a sleeping tiger and our princess couldn't stand up to it!"

It was two hours later that the New Model left that area of sea.

In the meantime, Quenser and Heivia remained motionless at the bottom of the cold ocean.

But they did not rejoice when they began surfacing.

The ocean surface was its kingdom.

The New Model now held dominion over 70% of the planet.

Part 10

Mission Report B-05

March 22 – 0000 Hours

Legitimacy Kingdom New Caledonia District – Special Political Prison "Château de Rouge" (Remains)

Quenser once more floated in the dark ocean.

He was worried about the container cells, but it seemed they were well sealed. The metal boxes filled with air rocked in the waves like a can or bottle. They did not sink.

"Are you alive? Hey, Mariage!"

"Bhah! Cough cough!!"

She breathed in some seawater and started coughing, but the gentle glasses girl managed to grab onto a wooden panel floating nearby.

"Grab onto me."

"What!? Wh-why!?"

"Hurry up if you don't want to die! That thing can search the battlefield using sound. It's probably targeting you using your heartbeat, but we managed to avoid its attack a few times already. If you think about it rationally, we wouldn't normally be able to escape laser attacks that can easily shoot down fighters or cruise missiles!!"

"O-oh… Its scan fails when multiple heartbeats overlap."

"In the ocean, all it needed to do was shoot individually diving frogmen or sink a huge ship."

"B-but!! Its specs are good enough to accurately analyze acoustic signatures in the middle of all the sounds made in Object battles, right!? Th-then overlapping our heartbeats won't be enough!!"

"It wasn't made to select an individual out of a close-packed crowd! It also hasn't shown any sign of locating us from our voices . Even if it can detect the sounds, its algorithm was made to detect mechanized units, so it eliminates it as background noise!! When you search for recipe sites on a search engine, you don't find any car sites. This is the same! The Megalodiver is normally at the bottom of the ocean, so it didn't need to think about anti-personnel combat because a huge group of frogmen would never reach it in the first place. To not waste its time, it doesn't even have the most basic algorithms for that kind of thing!!"

"Th-that's all speculation. You have no proof of any of it!"

"You want proof? If it was fully-equipped with anti-personnel functionality, it would have killed us while we discussed this!! So hurry!!"

"E-eeee!?"

Mariage frantically clung to him from the front.

Even so, the ocean was cold in the middle of the night.

Quenser felt as if his organs themselves were shivering and he thought his very life force was being sapped away by the cold.

But the sight before him made him forget even that.

An Object battled an Object.

The damaged Baby Magnum had tried to attack the prison and rescue Mariage while the Megalodiver had tried to kill the "genius monster" who might find a weakness in it. The two of them now clashed on the ocean surface.

The restriction to only laser beams no longer applied. The Baby Magnum switched out its seven main cannons and fired metal shells, plasma, lasers, and other types of attacks. Sometimes its attacks spread out in a fan shape, sometimes they cut off the enemy's escape route, and sometimes they focused on a single point as the enemy came to a stop.

That magical division between spreading out the fire and concentrating it held something that went beyond skill.

It seemed to be possessed by the divine.

The Megalodiver obtained tremendous propulsion by drawing in massive amounts of seawater and firing it backwards like wings , but it could not fully evade even with that high-speed movement.

In addition to direct attacks, the seven main cannons also fired on the enemy's predicted evasion routes. No matter where it tried to run, it would be hit.

But…

"What…is that?"

"That's the enemy we must defeat."

"But… There's no way we can!!"

"Even so, we have to!!"

The New Model's strategy was simple to put in words.

It fired its many secondary cannons straight down at the same moment.

This was of course not meant to target the Baby Magnum. Anything but a main cannon could not do any real damage to the sturdy armor of an Object.

Then what was the Megalodiver targeting?

What did it gain by firing straight down?

That too was simple.

It created a wall.

A colossal pillar of water rose in front of the New Model and that thick wall diverted the princess's cannon fire.

The angle at which it altered their path was not all that large.

It was just a few degrees or a dozen degrees at most.

【メガロダイバー】
MEGALODIVER

全長…80メートル

最高速度…時速550キロ

装甲…2.5センチ×400層(溶接など不純物含む)+
近接防御システム『水遁の衣』

用途…海上高度防衛戦用第二世代

分類…海洋長距離掃海兵器+???

運用者…自防PMC

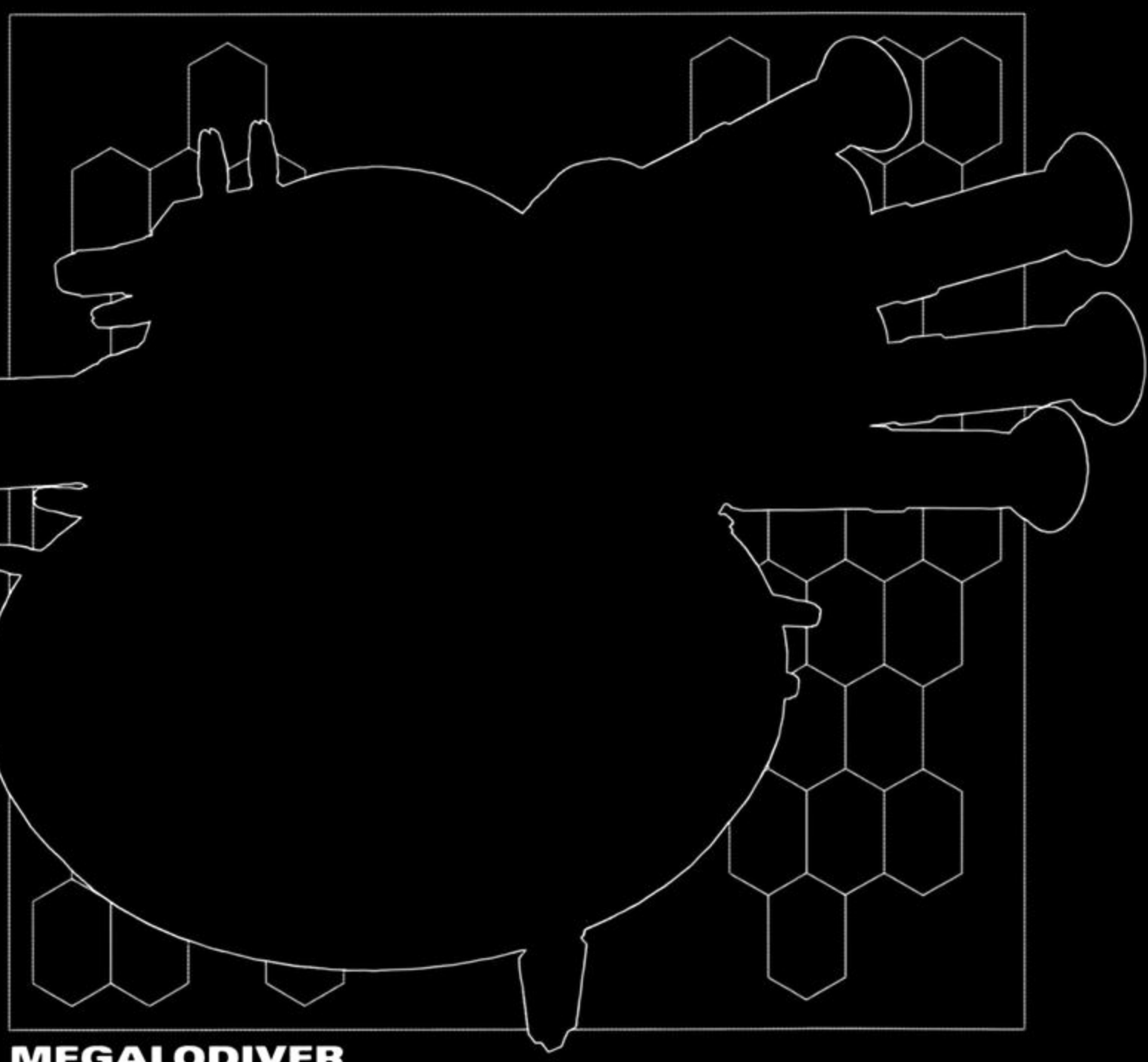
仕様…エアクッション+ウォータージェット推進

主砲…レーザービーム

副砲…レーザービーム、コイルガン(実質的に『水遁の衣』専用)

コードネーム…メガロダイバー(海の底に巨体が棲息しているところから)

メインカラーリング…灰色



MEGALODIVER

But the Megalodiver would move hard in the opposite direction . The two actions created a large gap that allowed it to just barely escape the princess's supposedly unavoidable bombardment. It was a magnificent performance, much like a bullfight.

"We've been calling it the Tatami Shield," said Quenser with a gulp. No matter how many times he saw it, the fearful awe did not fade. "The metal shells are diverted by the water resistance. Lasers are light, so they're bent on the same principle as a prism. Plasma and electron beams have their path altered by the wall of water absorbing their heat energy. There's only so much it can absorb, but it's enough to bend them."

"The concept is simple enough, but how does it match the timing so perfectly!? Those laser beams are flying at the speed of light and it's blocking every single one with those walls of water!!"

"Lamenting is easy."

A large group of transport helicopters and hovercrafts from the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion approached to retrieve Quenser and the other prisoners whose container cells had been thrown into the ocean.

As he watched that, the boy spoke to Mariage.

"But we can't escape alive unless we find out how. And the same goes for you."

"…!?"

"Welcome to war. This is the true face of this era, so quit complaining and enjoy it. That's the only way to survive!!"

Chapter 3: Eyes of the Goddess Glowing Deep in the Darkness >> All-Out War in the New Caledonia District

Part 1

The theoretical idea had existed for a long time.

For example, an anti-ship missile fired from a submarine or guided missile destroyer would fly just a few meters off the ocean surface while travelling at speeds greater than Mach 5. It was created to slip past the Gatling guns and other close-in weapon systems, blow a hole in in the side of the enemy ship at the waterline, and ensure the ship flooded.

Just as mirages were used for fighters to escape anti-air lasers, those anti-ship missiles were the representative enemy the earliest Objects were designed to face.

If the missile was loaded with a small nuclear warhead, it was feared an Objects' anti-air lasers and a satellite interceptor would be insufficient to protect a large city on the coast.

One suggestion put together as a countermeasure was to use mines or shells to produce tremendous pillars of water which would form a thick enough wall to knock the missile from the air. The liquid might seem soft to a normal person, but it became a tremendously solid wall to something flying at Mach 5. Striking the wall would tear the missile apart in midair.

Ultimately, getting the timing right proved extremely difficult and the idea was abandoned for a long time. Once improvements in parallel processing technology for anti-air laser targeting radars considerably raised the anti-ship missile interception rate, everyone forgot about it.

That unique technique was forgotten by the flow of time.

It should have ended there.

Should have.

"Agh, this is hopeless! There's no way we can win!!"

A soaking wet Quenser flailed around while lying face up on a giant ship's deck. The NTR girl named Mariage Nightcap was sitting nearby with her legs bent back to either side. Even if New Caledonia was in the southern hemisphere, they were still shivering from being soaking wet in the darkness of the night.

The pouring rain had stopped at some point, but that allowed them to focus more on the cold night air.

The Megalodiver was not there.

Once that New Model had retreated for some reason, Quenser and Mariage had been picked up by Legitimacy Kingdom hovercrafts. The innocent prisoners had also been collected from

the containers they had been dumped into the ocean inside. All of them had then travelled back to the disguised cruiser known as the Scarlet Princess that Frolaytia was using as a flagship.

They had somehow escaped death, but it was not over yet.

They could not relax until they knew why the enemy had left (or rather, overlooked them) and the higher levels of the Legitimacy Kingdom military had decided to continue the attack, so they would be tossed in front of the Megalodiver again.

They had to find some way to defeat it during their short break.

"B-before even getting to the Tatami Shield, how does it detect things so accurately using only sound?"

"What?"

"Using sound to detect enemies is what submarines do, but that only works because sound propagates through water faster than air. Plenty of things can exceed the speed of sound in air and the Megalodiver needs to keep up with that supersonic world."

"That thing isn't evading after detecting the shells the other Object fires," spat out Quenser while still lying on the deck. "It's detecting the subtle noises of the targeting lenses and cannons moving and using that to predict where the shells will be fired. That's how it can ignore the barrier created by the speed of sound. "

The situation would change if the enemy Object itself could exceed the speed of sound, but the Baby Magnum could not move that quickly.

"B-but! There are explosions everywhere! Both active sonar and directional microphones would be useless!"

"That's the entire damn point! It can distinguish just the sound waves it wants out of the intense noise created from all those different waveforms colliding. I don't know what kind of supercomputer it has installed to analyze that in an instant, but it's definitely doing it! Crushing its ears would be difficult. We need to find a way to defeat it despite being detected, but I'm not sure anything like that exists! I've had enough of this!!"

A girl approached as Quenser began flailing around on the deck once more.

She was the Pilot Elite princess who wore a skintight special suit. The maintenance soldiers were working as quickly as possible to exchange the battered Baby Magnum's parts, so the princess had nothing to do.

"Quenser, did you just say I'm weak?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Did your lack of screentime turn you yandere!?"

"You definitely said it. You said you have to do something about this because I'm weak. If you keep saying that, I won't provide covering fire for you."

"Hold up!! That's a death sentence in the clean wars ruled by Objects!!"

Quenser frantically sat up, but an odd weight obstructed his movement. He looked over and found Mariage still had her arms wrapped around his neck and her ample chest pressed against him .

He had a feeling an ominous shimmering began to rise from behind the princess.

"And who is this Holstein in sheep's clothing?" asked the princess.

"In the red corner, Mariaaaaaaaaage Nightcaaaaaaaaaap!! I distinctly remember there being a detailed explanation during the pre-mission briefing!!"

"I want to know why she's clinging to you like cheese toast!!"

"I'd like to know the same thing! What are you doing!?"

"Eh…eh heh heh. I still don't feel like I was rescued. I can't relax unless I do this."

Mariage was essentially saying, "I'm afraid of the Megalodiver attacking if we don't hide my heartbeat. I know I'm worrying too much, but I want to overlap our heartbeats." However, the aura behind the princess only grew more ominous.

"Ahh, this really calms me down."

"Quenser, you can go fight a war with nothing but two lumps of fat."

"Wait. Wait a sec, princess! This girl is the type who's pulled around by others! She's the NTR type!! I already fell victim to that in the Château de Rouge! I know letting her manipulate me is not a good idea!!"

"But you still tore me away from that mean jailer in the very, very end."

"…"

"That was to find a weakness in the Megalodiver, you backstabbing slut!! And I was caught between the jailors' full-auto shotguns and that Object. Of course I'm going to kick a dirty old man in the face to survive!!"

"My policy is to cling to the strongest-looking guy in reach."

"Then go join the Megalodiver! We'll blow you away along with it!!"

"…"

"Oh, c'mon. If I joined the Megalodiver, you'd complain but still come to rescue me."

"Like hell I would! Not this time!! And after this is over, I'm definitely reporting to the higher ups that you betrayed me at the end there. I hope you're prepared to be thrown in prison for some weird crime or another!!"

"Saying 'after this is over' makes your hesitation plain as day. I can tell I'm on the safest route here."

"……Excuse me."

If words had heat, the words that leaked from the princess's mouth might have looked like flickering flames of phosphorus.

"The problem lies in this unique harmony between you two. Who do you think actually put her life on the line to stop the Megalodiver?"

"W-w-w-w-w-wait, princess! Stop climbing on top of me and shaking me by the collar!! My brain's gonna turn to butter!! Gbh! U-ugh. I can't even enjoy the lovely sensation sitting on my stomach like this!!"

"Hey, this is no time to be horsing around," cut in a new voice.

The voice belonged to Heivia who had dragged Quenser and Mariage onto the Scarlet Princess's deck. He was looking to the port side of the disguised cruiser rather than at Quenser, Mariage, and the princess.

"This isn't funny. Our armed cruise ship is coming up alongside us. There's no way this is going to end well."

" 'Our'? You mean the Winchell family?"

Quenser looked over while working to tear Mariage from him.

A new majestic silhouette had appeared on the ocean to replace the Megalodiver.

The giant ship was just as gorgeous as the (seemingly) perfect and luxurious Scarlet Princess.

"That's the Summer Vacation." Heivia did not sound happy. " That must mean they're onboard."

The two ships were only about five meters apart.

The Summer Vacation had a happy-sounding name and looked like a luxurious cruise ship, but it had gigantic cannons and the Gatling guns of a close-in weapon system attached here and there. Unlike the disguised cruiser, this ship made no intent to hide the weapons. There was no sign of compartments to store them.

The watertight door on the side deck opened and a horizontal row of its crew exited.

They all had one distinguishing feature.

"Why are they all maids?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Why are you doing your best to not look me in the eye? Don't tell me this is related to some kind of conflict in your noble family."

While Heivia grew oddly withdrawn, their own watertight door opened and Frolaytia walked out onto the deck with several bodyguards.

All the maids bowed, but Frolaytia did not salute in return.

"Private soldiers of the Winchell family? What are civilian bodyguards doing here?"

The oldest (using height and bust size for reference) maid who wore an eyepatch replied. The maid uniform did not suit her.

(It can't be! I thought only cruel, scarred sergeants were allowed to carry those!)

"Yes, major. While on a sightseeing cruise nearby, we happened to learn that your unit had been forced into a difficult battle. I apologize for acting without permission, but we decided to lend a hand."

Heivia started trembling and his lips were as blue as when he had been thrown in the pool the other day.

"Y-you mean it was your doing that the Megalodiver retreated? But how!? You've gotta be joking. You didn't pay a new Object to fight, did you!?"

The maid narrowed her one eye like a dagger, turned toward him as if looking at a dung beetle, and gave a low groan.

"Yooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu are so filled with delusions I'm amazed you're still alive. Not even a noble can directly own an Object."

"That tone!! No maid should be using that tone of voice!!"

Ignoring Heivia as he started crying, Frolaytia placed her long, narrow kiseru back in her mouth.

"I would like an explanation as well."

"Of course, major." The maid's expression and tone instantly returned to normal. "The Object in question seemed to be frequently sending encrypted transmissions to a different unit, so we attacked them. That unit was likely used for supplies and maintenance. It would take a considerable amount of time just to prepare the inspection and maintenance of a fifty meter machine."

Still soaking wet, Quenser looked up in realization.

"I get it. The Megalodiver was covered in lava by the submarine volcano and a few of its water intakes had to have been covered up . The Pilot Elite would have difficulty removing that lava alone, so he wants to get the maintenance done as soon as possible. That way they can revive the Megalodiver's diving ability."

The Megalodiver had decided to rescue the other unit despite lacking confirmation of Mariage Nightcap's death.

They had spent three full days and used all the materials available to put together that makeshift maintenance base, so it was only natural for them to panic if it was attacked.

That had allowed Quenser and Mariage to escape the slaughter.

Heivia let out a sigh.

"Does that mean we can relax for now? With its supply line and maintenance cut off and its diving ability sealed, not even the Megalodiver can-…"

"Yooooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu are…"

Before even hearing her out, Heivia covered his face with his hands and started sobbing.

Showing no concern whatsoever, the eyepatch maid continued speaking.

"Our bombardment and landing operation destroyed about 70% of that unit, but we were forced to leave once the Object drew near. They can most likely perform maintenance once it arrives, so we must attack before that work is complete."

"I see."

"Major, this may be presumptuous, but we can supply some related documents we acquired during the attack. The papers and photographs we gathered from their base would be useless in the hands of civilians such as us."

"Were you worried about the Winchell family's heir?"

"We have no business with that dung beetle. We were only fulfilling our duty as Legitimacy Kingdom citizens."

The eyepatch maid verbally discarded him with a smile.

The noble boy had long since curled up on the deck, but Frolaytia simply breathed out a long stream of sweet-smelling smoke.

"I would like to thank you for your cooperation, but I cannot accept your offer to share intelligence. We deal in a lot of classified information and we cannot place any responsibility on the shoulders of civilians."

"Why not view it as civilians supplying intelligence or confiscating documents from an unofficial operation? If the flow of information is in only one direction, you need not worry about classified information leaking to civilians."

"That would be improper treatment of those who saved us."

Frolaytia grinned and the eyepatch maid gave a thin smile of her own.

The silver-haired, huge-breasted major pointed to Quenser with her long, narrow kiseru.

"Quenser and…Mariage Nightcap was it? You two board their ship as civilians. A conversation between civilians is no business of a soldier like me."

The way the two of them were treated as a pair produced a noise of anger from the princess, but that was none of Frolaytia's concern.

(Oh, no. The princess is looking angry! She must be starving for entertainment and she must think this cruise ship is like a theme park!)

Quenser seemed to be perceptive yet was actually misreading the situation entirely, but he spoke up all the same.

"Heh…eh heh heh. I have an idea, Frolaytia. How about we let the princess join us on the- hot! O-ow! You just jabbed me with the end of the kiseru, didn't you!?"

"Are you stupid? The Pilot Elite has her conditioning and all the tuning and tests needed for the Baby Magnum as its parts are replaced. Where in that does she have time to go play? Well?"

"Hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot"

As Quenser writhed around at the hands of his huge-breasted commander, the princess remained perfectly expressionless with sparkling angry sound effects surrounding her head like the VFX of an Information Alliance idol.

Next, Frolaytia pointed the kiseru toward Heivia.

"Heivia, you go visit home. I'm giving you leave, so head over to the Winchell family's armed cruise ship."

"No!! I don't want to be thrown to that army of cruel tutors!!!!"

Despite Heivia's shrill protests, the line of maids simply turned cold looks toward him.

Having received his orders, Quenser stood up from the deck while still soaking wet.

"So what's with those maids anyway?"

"I'll explain later, so please keep quiet."

Part 2

Quenser, Mariage, and Heivia transferred from the Legitimacy Kingdom's disguised cruiser "Scarlet Princess" to the Winchell family's armed cruise ship "Summer Vacation".

They moved from ship to ship using an unreliable makeshift bridge created by leaning a ladder on its side. The pitch black sea visible below needlessly filled them with fear.

Quenser scratched at his wet blond hair.

"Hi, I'm Quenser Barbotage."

"I-I'm Mariage Nightcap."

The eyepatch maid gave a frightening first impression, but she replied softly and with a smile.

"Welcome, you two. I am Karen I Winchell. Please feel at home during your short visit."

Once she saw Heivia behind them, she blatantly clicked her tongue and spit over the handrail.

"
Yooooooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu need to learn to introduce yourself without being asked."

"I have to introduce myself!? As you well know, I'm your master, the great Heivia Winchell!!"

"Huh?" Mariage tilted her head. "That maid and the soldier are both named Winchell?"

Once she mentioned it, Quenser realized it was odd for a member of a noble family to be wearing a maid uniform.

But Heivia shrugged.

"My family has a custom of granting the name of Winchell to servants or cooks who give especially exemplary service. They're adopted into the family, but adopted family has no legal rights in the Legitimacy Kingdom where bloodline is everything. They can't inherit the family, so it's nothing more than a title or a badge of honor. Speaking of which, the I of her middle name stands for Imitation."

Karen I Winchell ignored the dung beetle and gave a splendid smile.

"The Winchell family has a custom of granting its name to servants who provide especially exemplary service. They are adopted into the family, but they have no legal rights in the Legitimacy Kingdom where bloodline is everything. I am well aware of my position as a maid. Oh, by the way, the I of my middle name stands for Imitation."

"I just explained all that!! What is wrong with you!? Do you have a filter in place that keeps you from hearing what I say!?"

"The Summer Vacation is one of the Winchell family's seven armed cruise ships. It is similar to that disguised cruiser, but the two ships deal with pirates differently: the cruiser is a military ship made to look like a cruise ship while this is a cruise ship with the weapons of a military ship added on. Rather than lure in enemies, we intimidate them into staying away."

"Now you're ignoring my protests!?" shouted Heivia.

The topic seemed to appeal to Quenser's mechanical heart because his eyes began sparkling.

"That's a huge gun over there, but how many centimeters is it?"

"It is 50cm. The Island Nation warships had 46cm guns, so this might be on the upper end of what is installed on ships. It is a far ways off from an Object's weapons, of course."

"It's so huge that it all looks top heavy. How do you manage damage control?"

"This is a cruise ship, so a high center of gravity is unavoidable. However, the ship has a unique float structure, so it is sturdier than your average heavy cruiser."

"M-more specifically! How does that technology work!? Pant pant!!"

"The entire outer shell is covered with small, honeycomb-like air tanks. In addition to acting as a simple float, it also reduces the effectiveness of chemical warheads that make use of the Munroe effect or metal jets."

"Defense using air!? D-damn. So it's made sturdy by faithfully following the standard of floating the ship with air. This has advanced in a different direction from the Objects that hold everything back with thick armor!! B-but wait. If I could overturn the idea that the two can't work together, it might lead to a new Object design."

Karen I Winchell tilted her head slightly and Mariage Nightcap had long since backed away.

"Um, excuse me, Mr. Barbatoge. Are you what is known as a geek?"

"N-no!! I may be interested in high-level technology, but it's only because I want to become a dashing and productive member of society!! Y'know, the kind of person who the beautiful young lady in the neighborhood asks to hook up her recording equipment!!"

"Understood. So you are a geek who is not aware he is a geek."

It seemed the maid had reached a strange conclusion.

As Quenser began protesting that she did not understand at all, a dark smile appeared on Heivia's lips. The look in his eyes was telling Quenser to join him on the receiving end of the abuse.

Quenser knew being dragged down by that loser would not end well, so he began an attack in a more positive direction.

"Can nobles really own something like this? I'm not just referring to the weapons. It must take over one hundred specialists to run something like this."

"We are nothing more than civilian maids trained in self-defense techniques. We may have acquired a few special international qualifications, but anyone could attempt to do the same."

Heivia gave a piercing comment to throw cold water on Karen's perfect smile.

"Don't act like you're not a monster of a woman who can kill a bear or a tiger barehanded."

"What was that?"

Karen glared at him and he let out a shriek much like a tea kettle that had reached a boil.

Frolaytia gave a comment of her own over the radio.

"Not every noble owns an armed cruise ship. It costs 200,000 euros to run one of those for a full day. Taking a seven or eight day cruise around the world costs as much as a brand new stealth fighter. Unless you're talking about the Winchell family, the Vanderbilt family, or another top-level noble family, they wouldn't be able to keep a ship like that running even if they could purchase it."

"And the Winchell family has seven of them? Huh? But why are maids riding around on something that eats up money like that?"

"It was originally a birthday present for some little sister or another, but she grew sick of it and now they ride around on it. If you don't use machines periodically, they'll break down, so the family turns a blind eye."

"Uheh," groaned Mariage.

However, Quenser latched onto something else entirely.

"Wait. Wait just a minute, Heivia. Did I hear that right? You have a little sister. And not just one! You have enough that you can 't keep track of them all? And on top of that, you have a beautiful maid as an adoptive older sister?"

Seeing his horrible friend nod, Quenser brought his radio to his mouth.

"Death to the bourgeois!! All who agree, raise your hand!!"

A thundering roar of voices reached them from the neighboring ship. Despite being past midnight, the lonely soldiers were full of energy. They likely had pent up energy after having nothing to do.

"The reality is nothing like what it sounds like!!" lamented Heivia.

"What!? Is this that theory about families with a real little sister having no dreams whatsoever!? I won't allow it!! This is a crime of luxury!! What era of nobles are you from, dammit!?"

"I'm a real noble from this era!! Got a problem with that!?"

The two idiots began grappling, but Karen I Winchell intervened. Specifically, she sent a full-swing slap…no, strike with the butt of the palm into the noble's cheek and sent him spinning through the air for several meters.

"Bbgh!! Bhbbh!!"

“
Yooooooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu need to stop crying like a pig. Have you forgotten how to be polite in front of guests?”

All the blood drained from Quenser’s face as well.

“J-just the head? Y-you sent him several meters with a hit to the head? Just the head???”

“Do not worry. A strike from a slipper is not enough to kill a dung beetle.”

Mariage tugged on Quenser’s uniform with tears in her eyes. The look in those eyes said a further attack would kill Heivia if they did not change the subject.

“A-anyway! Miss Karen, I can think of you as part of the invincible maid unit that protects the Winchell family, right!?”

For some reason, the tall cool beauty’s face grew a bit flushed and she fidgeted while averting her gaze.

“I-I do not like that title. It is embarrassing.”

(Oh, this is working.)

Quenser decided to press on like this.

“Um, then what’s your actual title? Noble Maid probably applies to about a hundred maids on this ship.”

"I would fall into the Milk Maid category."

"What kind of sexual title is that!!!???"

"Where are you looking and what are you imagining!?"

Karen's entire face grew as red as a tomato and she covered her chest with her hands.

(I'm definitely on the right track!!)

Quenser gestured to his horrible friend, but Heivia did not see it as he lay limply on the deck.

Mariage tugged on Quenser's clothes and whispered to him.

"U-um, isn't a milk maid a maid on a rural farm that milks cows and makes butter?"

"N-not in this case, honey." Heivia finally rose unsteadily to his feet. "She's a legit combat type that directly controls the security of detached Winchell land such as manors or plantations.

Don't think for a second that she's some naïve maid who milks cows."

Karen loudly clicked her tongue and Heivia grew desperate.

"There's a custom of sending noble heirs to an area with clean water and air as soon as they're born. That meant she was in charge of breastfeeding me, but you wouldn't believe how that

turned out!! The policy is meant to protect the heir from pollution and allergies, but the next thing I knew, that eyepatch maid kept trying to kill me!!"

"That was a part of your advanced education."

"You mean that nonsense about a noble needing to be prepared for attempted poisonings or other assassinations!? You can imagine the disasters that led to!"

Quenser was on the verge of giving a groan of sympathy, but then…

"I also prepared you for the seductive techniques of female spies and marriage scam artists, dung beetle."

"I'm going to encase you in concrete and throw you into the ocean! Get over here!!!"

"She wouldn't have gone through with it!" shouted Heivia. "I knew it was a trap and she threatened to chop it off if I gave in!!"

Despite his protests, Quenser began beating him with clenched fists. He used the extra strength one gained in a crisis to do quite a bit of damage despite their usual division of roles.

Meanwhile, Karen I Winchell smiled.

"If you are finished preparing to execute that toilet beetle, how about we get down to business? Thanks to our attack on the

Megalodiver's supply and maintenance unit, we have information on that Island Nation Object. The documents are stored inside the ship, so please come this way."

Part 3

The eyepatch maid named Karen I Winchell led Quenser and the others through the armed cruise ship named the Summer Vacation. Bright lights so thoroughly swept away the darkness and shadows that it was easy to forget it was the middle of the night.

Seeing the inside showed Quenser this truly was a luxury cruise ship. It was a stark contrast to the Scarlet Princess which had been primarily a military vessel and thus had been cramped and uncomfortable inside.

"Now I'm worried about being so wet," he groaned.

The corridor was carpeted, so his wet footprints bothered him. If he was later asked to pay for any damage, he doubted a commoner could ever clear the debt.

He was also a bit worried about his crotch, but he figured he was unlikely to catch the kind of tropical rainforest disease that made the contents of his pants grow all wet and swollen.

"We have no clothing for guests as the ship was only meant to carry maids," explained Karen apologetically. "We only have bathrobes and maid uniforms."

"Heh. Sorry, young lady, but I've already sworn to forever seal away the legendary Quensette."

"Eh!? You've worn one before!?"

Mariage's hysterical question brought a distant look to his eyes.

"It was during a cultural festival back at my safe country school. Uniting the guys to all vote for a maid café was good and all, but the girls were so angry they employed a scorched earth tactic and made all the guys play baseball in maid uniforms."

"Uheh…" groaned Mariage as she imagined that hellish scene.

For some reason, Karen held out her index fingers and thumbs to create two L-shapes and formed a rectangular picture frame from those. She used her one eye to point the finder of her heart toward Quenser's face and then body.

"Hm. Now that you mention it, you have a cute face and a slender body, so you wouldn't be bad. Heh. But even if we put you in a maid uniform, you wouldn't have a partner! Putting our tree bug in that role just wouldn't have the proper beauty!!"

"No…um…?"

A chill ran down Quenser's spine and he decided to change the subject.

"A-anyway, I love seeing nothing but maid uniforms on the ship, but is that wise? Isn't it dangerous if you fall overboard?"

"Do not worry. The uniforms are made for quick removal in case we fall overboard or our skirt is caught in a machine."

"…"

Quenser was momentarily overcome by the wicked urge to push her into the ocean right that instant, but they were unfortunately walking down an internal corridor. He of course left it a secret that the idea of immediately removable maid uniforms filled him with an indescribable fuzzy feeling.

Their destination was one of several dance halls that took up multiple floors. The grand piano and snack table were pushed to by the wall and a simple blue sheet covered the entire floor. The sheet was covered with tidy lines of documents and burnt, misshapen pieces of metal.

The scene seemed somehow ominous and reminded Quenser of a line of body bags after a plane crash.

In truth, each of them may have been dyed with death.

"We gathered as much as we could in the fifteen minutes before the Object arrived. If that unit was in charge of supplies and maintenance as we suspect, these documents may help you learn how the Megalodiver works and where a weakness may lie."

"That'll really help."

The look in Quenser's eyes quickly changed.

Large machines, especially Objects, had a way of gathering his focus.

"So where was this unit hiding anyway?"

"On a rust-filled island here in the New Caledonia District. It's used as a tanker graveyard and no one lives there. It's about fifty kilometers from that prison."

"Oh, so it's a workshop where they dismantle old, rundown tankers? The point is to sell the parts as scrap metal, right?"

"They use crude acetylene burners, so there is no end to the accidental explosions. None of the locals except for those who work there ever get close and those workers have no reason to be there without a new tanker to work on. It seems like a decent place to hide."

The eyepatch maid bowed and left the dance hall.

"Now then," said Quenser as he cracked his neck. "Perhaps it would be wrong to call this a pile of treasure."

"Stop licking your lips like that. Only slightly sexual girls should be doing that."

But Quenser was not one to be stopped by that. The entire reason he had ducked through showers of bullets was to gain information on currently-active Objects. Not to mention that this Object was a second generation developed in secret by the Island Nation that was a legend in the field of Objects. If this was not

enough to get him excited, he would be better off heading back to his safe country to stare at a blackboard.

"This is the heat-resistant reactive compound. Is this scorched thing the transparent reflector for a laser beam? And these documents here…"

"Hey, Quenser! Explain your plan. What am I supposed to focus on here!?"

"Everything!! For the moment, everything!! A-amazing. Is this a layout overview for the braces that distribute its weight!? B-back in a safe country, you'd never see this without sneaking into a national research lab!! And this is…pant pant!!"

"You pervert! I'm gonna call the Black Uniforms on you!!"

Mariage whimpered and then spoke up to focus the two idiots who were veering way off track.

"U-um… Aren't we in a lot of trouble if we can't find a way to sink the Megalodiver? Shouldn't we look through the Tatami Shield defense system first as it's the greatest threat?"

"Oh, that's right!! Anyway, who even is this huge-breasted glasses girl? I think her wet clothes are a little see-through."

"That's Mariage Nightcap, the girl who was thrown in a cell. However, she's the NTR type, so letting your guard down won't

end well. The more you push, the easier she ends up somewhere else. In other words, she's easy to make yours, but it'll end up hurting you later."

"Sounds exciting to me!!"

Mariage jumped like a small animal and began keeping her distance from Heivia.

Karen I Winchell happened to return to the dance hall just as the noble boy started breathing heavily, so she performed an unrestrained middle kick on his side.

After the sound of a blanket being struck, he had been defeated.

"N-nfhhn!?"

"

Yooooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu really are creepy. Even your sounds of pain creep me out."

As he lay collapsed on the floor, Karen stared down at him like she was looking at the contents of a balled-up tissue. She carried a silver tray so smoothly it did not produce any clattering noises and she lined up a tea set and a few baked sweets on the snack table by the wall.

"Have you found any useful information?"

"Wait. I think this might be it. It's titled 'Weapons for Zero Water Pressure'. This is a list of equipment used when fighting on the surface, right? Wouldn't the Tatami Shield fall under that classification?"

"But doesn't the Tatami Shield simply fire normal cannons at the ocean surface to create pillars of water?"

"No naval Object has pulled off that tactic before, but this one is turning aside 100% of attacks. We should probably assume it has a unique targeting system, a special type of shell, or some other secret."

"I see. Oh, I have Ceylon and Assam tea prepared. Will that be a problem? Milk and lemons are over here. If you would like apple peels, just ask."

"This is fine, this is fine. I want to focus on these documents right now. But…what are these symbols? This is the language unique to the Island Nation, isn't it? It doesn't use the alphabet, so I don't even know where to start!"

"Is this their ancient writing system?" asked Mariage. "I've heard you read it top to bottom and back and forth at the same time. I don't know much about it either."

"Please eat these muffins and crackers with a spread of your choice. If I may, I would recommend the anchovy and cottage cheese spread."

"Just looking at the diagrams, it's…what? Looks like it's pumping something into the water, but it doesn't look like a shell."

As Quenser muttered to himself, he suddenly gasped and stopped moving.

He had completely forgotten about something, so he grabbed his radio with a trembling hand.

"F-Frolaytia!! I just realized something!!"

"What is it? Did you learn something about the Megalodiver!?"

"This ship has normal food instead of nothing but eraser-like military rations! But why!?"

"Sigh. This is a civilian ship with self-defense weaponry, so we are not bound by military regulations," explained Karen. "To maintain a sense of what day it is, the workers eat fish on Mondays and veal on Fridays, but we are free to eat what we wish on any other day."

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Quenser shouted so loudly he thought he would shed tears of blood.

He was forced to eat flavorless erasers to maintain an even potential for all missions, so it truly felt like the ultimate luxury to have not just a meal fit for a noble but tea and snacks as well.

Meanwhile, Frolaytia sounded annoyed.

"Don't forget that your paycheck comes from the people's taxes. And don't get carried away. You can maintain a sense of what day it is by making curry once a week and preparing all those ingredients adds an extra logistical burden. That isn't going to fly with the military."

"No fair! Don't act like it's that much of an issue when you always have your tobacco and mini-fridge with you!!"

Their inability to read the characters of the Island Nation's unique language left them stuck, but Karen I Winchell spoke up.

"While preparing health foods for the Winchell family, I grew fond of the Island Nation's cuisine and green tea, so I learned a bit of the language."

"I doubt this is terminology found in a housewife's cookbook."

They had no other option, so Quenser handed Karen the classified document.

"I see, I see," she said surprisingly cutely. "It seems these are natural macromolecules. After being heated to sixty or seventy degrees by the heat of the reactor, they are fired into the sea."

"W-wait a minute. What the hell is a macromolecule?"

"

Yooooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu are-…"

"Fine! I won't say anything else!! Keep going!!"

Heivia had tears in his eyes, so Quenser kindly explained.

"Heivia. A natural macromolecule is what you also call starch. It's taken from potatoes and other plants. Do you get it now?"

"What!? Then why not just say starch!? Why would you go out of your way to make it confusing? Oh, I get it. You're obsessed with specs, aren't you?"

Karen grabbed a ceramic pot of hot water and pressed the bottom against Heivia's forehead. It was not a thermos, so the outside was hot too.

"Because that's what it says on the paper!!"

"Gyabaaah!? That's more or less a brand!!"

Incidentally, fifty degrees is apparently the limit for hot water in the reaction business, so do not try that at home.

"Dammit…dammit! What do you have against me!?"

"I have no particular hatred for you, but I cannot stand you in general."

"Don't say that so nonchalantly, you idiot! It pisses you off that I'm on the battlefield, doesn't it? You hate that someone who's getting along well with a member of the rival Vanderbilt family is trying to inherit the family, don't you!?" he spat out. "But I don't care what you want! It's wrong to be influenced by hatred from

centuries ago, especially when no one remembers why it started. I'm going to end that in my generation! I swear it! And I'm not going to ask you for help, so I don't need your approval. I've decided to do this even if I have to do it alone!!"

"Sigh. You can get as hot-blooded as you like, but have you forgotten that *I* hold the even hotter water?"

"Gyawaaah!!!???"

Mariage ignored the comedy act and asked a question.

"Why do they put starch in the ocean before using the Tatami Shield? And if they heat it to sixty to seventy degrees…"

"That temperature makes starch sticky like paste, doesn't it? Does that mean what I think it does?"

"Yes. I think they're trying to make a substance that will thicken the water," cut in Karen while ignoring Heivia who writhed in pain. "A shame they aren't using it for cooking."

"Pillars of water tall enough to completely cover the Object are enough of a shield, but does using starch to increase the viscosity of the seawater help it even further?"

"Something bothers me about this," muttered Quenser.

Mariage seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"I get that it's making the water all around it sticky, but the Megalodiver itself cools its reactor and gains propulsion by taking in seawater, right? But can it really suck up that sticky water?"

(Not only that, but it was using a water intake on top when we met it in the deep sea. How is it handling it on the surface? Does it have another intake on the bottom? Did it surface for a short term battle because it was afraid of sucking up sand from the bottom of the ocean? But if so, it doesn't make sense for it to create impure seawater with the starch. Does it have some further system?)

He could not find an answer, but the mystery needing solving was growing clearer.

"Frolaytia."

"If this is about food, it can wait. If you put in for leave, I'll turn a blind eye to any fish you catch during that time."

"It's about the Tatami Shield. …Or the Hiding Clothes of Water ? Is that the official name? Anyway, I have a few simple topics concerning the Megalodiver's defense system, so please contact the electronic simulation division."

"Give me more details."

He did so and she fell silent for a moment afterwards.

"I will of course have the electronic simulation division work on this, but I want you gathering information at the same time."

"Of course. We will search through all these documents and-…"

"Not like that," cut in Frolaytia. "The Megalodiver's emergency maintenance will be complete soon, so we don't have time to search randomly through a pile of documents. The only other source of useful information would be the tanker graveyard they're lurking inside."

"You don't mean…"

Quenser had a very bad feeling and Frolaytia's answer was simple.

"You discovered this mystery, so it's your responsibility to solve it."

At that time, he did not know that he would be punched by all the soldiers of a landing team in ten minutes time.

Part 4

"This could not be worse," muttered Quenser as he changed clothes in an empty room on the Scarlet Princess.

He removed the soaking wet prison uniform and put on his usual military uniform, but he was still uncomfortable because he had not had time to take a shower.

"Honestly, I shouldn't have said anything. Not noticing this kind of thing makes life so much easier. Is being a genius just asking for trouble?"

As his comrades had rather forcefully beaten him upon learning the details of the emergency mission, his actions were somehow unsteady.

He left the room and found someone in the corridor moving even more unsteadily than him.

(Hm?)

It appeared to be the princess.

Every maintenance soldier was at work on replacing the Baby Magnum's damaged armor plates, so she would be on standby.

The repeated battles would have worn her out. When they had spoken earlier, she may have been merely acting fine so as not to worry him.

He was a little worried and considered calling out to her, but then he heard something horrifying.

He heard her mumble to herself.

"Sh-she's asleep!? She's walking around in her sleep!!!???"

Could humans even sleep with their muscles stiff enough to support their body weight? Was she walking in her dream or was she vaguely aware of reality? Quenser could not quite grasp the situation, but he had to believe it because she was indeed walking in her sleep.

It would be far from funny if the princess hurt herself before the battle with the Megalodiver.

She would be fine walking along a corridor, but he decided to stop her from continuing to the stairs or anywhere like that.

His first thought was to grab her shoulders and shake her awake.

(But wait.)

He suddenly stopped and his gaze gradually moved down from her face.

His eyes finally stopped on her chest which looked modest but was actually fairly plentiful.

If she's asleep, it means nothing you do counts, right? Heh heh heh.

Quenser heard the whispering of something truly dark that the Faith Organization would likely do its best to crush.

His right hand automatically shot out, so he grabbed that wrist with his left hand to stop himself from touching the princess.

An all-or-nothing one-man play began.

"Tch!! Wait, my right hand. Giving in to those tempestuous emotions will lead to bad things in the future!! B-but I stopped at the last second, so it's fine. I didn't actually touch her, so it's fine!! If I sneezed now, it wouldn't be my fault if I happened to touch her, right!? It would be an accident, so it wouldn't be anyone's faul - Achoo!!"

Rather than a conflict between angel and demon, this was excuses from start to finish.

Forced along by his convenient arguments, his right hand attacked the princess's roundness like a snake swallowing an egg.

But…

"Mnyahhh…"

"What!? She knocked my hand-…!?"

Before he even finished speaking, the bodyguards of the intelligence department took swift action.

By the time he noticed metallic noises all around him, he had more than ten gun barrels pointed at him from less than a meter away.

That student let out a heartfelt wail as his face was deformed by a carbine barrel pressed against his cheek.

"Where the hell were you hiding!? Were you making light bend around you!?"

Despite being disguised, that military ship contained complexly bending corridors with thick exposed pipes, so there was plenty of space to hide. Not that a student would understand that.

"…"

"…"

"…"

The surrounding bodyguards said nothing.

Perhaps because they were guarding a young female Elite, all of the bodyguards were female and the same age or a little older than the princess. Their all-black night battle uniforms were tightly fitting and skintight and all of them were giving cold glares to this enemy of women.

It was possible each and every one of them was a kuudere.

Quenser decided to overcome this by switching on his positive side.

Otherwise he would have started to cry.

"Okay, okay. I get it," he said while raising his hand. "I won't do anything else. From the looks of things, the princess is safe in your hands. I was going this way, so I'll just - Ha ha!! Tricked you!! "

He quickly turned around and once more attempted to grab at the princess's delicious fruit from close range.

However, a bodyguard girl's carbine was jammed into the criminal's mouth a moment later.

"Mhmhmhmh. Mhmhmh. Mhmhmhmhmhmh."

"…?"

The bodyguard girl must have taken pity with what had become the most unsightly boy in the world because she pulled the carbine from his mouth.

As soon as she did, Quenser puffed out his chest, gathered strength in his gut, and shouted as loudly as he could.

"I don't care whose boobs they are anymore!!"

"!!!???"

"And in the instant that announcement makes you pause, Striker Quenser Barbotage will slip through your defensive line like a shooting star!!!"

With a tremendous noise, Quenser became a gust of wind.

Afterwards, two tragedies occurred.

Even if his trick had made them panic for an instant, those bodyguards were thoroughly trained killing machines. They were not about to overlook a student trying to slip past them and their panicked state gave them all the more subconscious accuracy when one of them swept his legs out from under him.

Also, the princess was still wandering around in her sleep, so her legs were moving with no concern for the situation surrounding her. Naturally, she was not aware that Quenser was toppling toward her.

Those two factors created an unwelcome miracle.

The princess's knee forcefully jabbed into Quenser's crotch.

Unfortunately, his mind was not yet evolved enough to call that a reward.

Part 5

The princess, Frolaytia, and many other soldiers were aboard the disguised cruiser known as the Scarlet Princess.

One of those was the old maintenance woman who let out a light sigh.

She was originally from the Island Nation.

"Pro_be_12… The Twelve Earthly Branches Project?" asked Frolaytia.

The old woman gave an annoyed nod.

"I was reminded of it when I heard their Megalodiver specializes in diving underwater."

"The Twelve Earthly Branches were the twelve original Objects that were created by the Island Nation and destroyed the nuclear age, right?"

The softness in Frolaytia's tone showed she knew she could not stand up to this old woman regardless of rank.

After all, she was a true veteran who had seen the start of this age of Objects with her own eyes. Her experience, achievements, skill, and knowledge were all on an entirely different level.

"In the end, they couldn't keep up with the advancing age and they're all at the bottom of the ocean now. But it is true they still function as a symbol of the Island Nation's ideals."

"Are you saying this diving Object is related to them?"

"I can't deny the possibility. It would take a huge amount of power to fish up those giant weights. Only another Object could manage it."

The idea of the original twelve Objects contained some appeal even to Frolaytia who had no connection to the Island Nation. No one who received any benefit from Objects was truly unrelated to this issue.

In that case, just how much more of an influence did those twelve Objects hold in the Island Nation itself?

Frolaytia thought for a bit and finally spoke.

"Well, I would have no problem with this if that were all there was to it."

"The Island Nation belongs to the Capitalist Corporations, so it would be of no concern to the Legitimacy Kingdom."

That answer was perfectly natural.

In her personal life, Frolaytia may have been fond of the Island Nation's culture, but she did not adore them so much she wanted to be killed by them.

"One thing bothers me," she added. "It's related to what Mariage Nightcap has done in the past."

"Oh, you mean the Private Bank? That Object containing the main server of a tax haven bank and therefore filled with secret

funds from around the world? Come to think of it, it belonged to the Capitalist Corporations as well and it's also at the bottom of the sea."

"If they're dragging something up, wouldn't that be a lot worse ? The self-defense PMC is almost entirely dead outside of the Object itself, but VIPs around the world could easily protect them with smiles on their faces if they controlled that main server's data. I would rather avoid that."

However, a theory was merely a theory.

They did not even know if the Megalodiver could drag a sunken Object from the bottom of the sea.

Was the self-defense PMC behind it or was someone larger backing them?

A lot was unknown, but there was one important point at the moment.

"This opponent is too disconcerting to ignore," said Frolaytia.

"If we're sinking it because we 'might as well', it means we can't claim to be allies of justice."

Part 6

"What is going on here?" groaned Quenser.

The rubber military boat travelling across the black ocean was packed full of around ten men. To keep as quiet as possible, it used a large motor rather than an engine and several identical boats cut through the waves along with it.

"Where did Mariage go? What about those maids!? I let down my guard for an instant, and I'm surrounded by filthy guys again!! "

"All of them count as civilians," answered Heivia in annoyance. "We can't take them to the battlefield."

"They can come as guests! And where are the female soldiers!?"

"They're packed in the next boat over and I'd much rather be there too!!"

"La la la♪ I'm a civilian student, so what ever happened to not bringing civilians with you? La la la la♪"

"Shut up!!" shouted several voices. "If you hadn't noticed anything, we wouldn't be out here in the first place!!"

Quenser experienced the truly rare experience of having fists strike him equally from all directions.

They had yet to run into the enemy, yet he had a serious bloody nose. Life was cruel.

As Quenser made makeshift plugs for his nose, Heivia spat out a comment.

"Well, with those savage maids around, the fleet can't let their guard down. Heading out to the battlefield might be the better option."

"Why do you get along so poorly? As a commoner, living with a maid sounds amazing."

"How should I know? She probably doesn't like that the heir to the Winchell family gets along with someone from the Vanderbilt family." He meaninglessly performed maintenance on his rifle as he spoke. "The whole thing's ridiculous. Who cares about noble pride? No one knows who started this damn tradition, but they're trying to continue centuries of bloodshed. I'm going to destroy that grudge and these family rules in my generation. If I wasn't prepared for that, I wouldn't have gone out of my way to take part in these wars."

To remain hidden, they were not using lights. Instead, the soldier in the back of the boat controlling the combination rudder and motor was wearing infrared goggles. Quenser and the others could only glimpse the mountainous silhouette of the island splitting the black sea from the indigo night sky.

The soldier in the back gave instructions over his radio.

"All boats, come to a stop. There's a searchlight, so be careful."

Heivia frowned in the darkness.

"What? A searchlight?"

"It's infrared," said the soldier. "Take a peek through your scope and you'll see all too well. They're searching the ocean with active sensors."

Quenser shrugged.

It sounded frightening enough, but it also meant they would be fine so long as they did not enter the invisible circle of the searchlight. The enemy was essentially telling them how to escape detection.

Heivia scratched his head.

"Are they joking around?"

"An invisible trap might be located past this obvious trap, so let 's be careful."

Fortunately, the island in question was a scrapyard used to take apart rusted and falling-apart tankers. Plenty of rusty masses were scattered around the island after their last efforts were not quite enough to reach the island.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others' rubber boat used them as cover to escape the infrared searchlights and slowly but surely approach.

"The island is shaped like a fried egg with two yolks," explained Heivia. "It's small enough to travel around in an hour and it has two mountains. The tanker dismantling harbor is located on the north side, so we're sneaking in on the empty south

side and travelling through the forest and mountain to the harbor. ”

“Was that infrared searchlight coming from the top of the ‘yolk’ ?”

“Don’t take out the sensors. If they don’t realize anything is happening, we’ll have more freedom of movement.”

Heivia switched from spitting out his words to weakly groaning .

“The worst part is the Object. The Megalodiver. If its sensors are fully activated, we’ll be spotted right away. It was identifying an individual by the heartbeat back at that prison, so holding your breath isn’t gonna hide you.”

“That won’t happen,” readily replied Quenser.

Heivia looked doubtful, so the student clarified.

“It’s a psychological issue, not a technological one. Heivia, we were working at the ridiculous depths of 1500 meters under the ocean, remember? What did you think once you were freed from there and made it back on the ship?”

“What? I was happy to say goodbye to that cramped prison of water pressure and I wanted to jump in a king sized bed and sleep for about three days.”

“The same should apply to the Megalodiver’s Pilot Elite. That monster may have fought off our princess both underwater and on

the surface, but it didn't go perfectly for it. It frantically surfaced after being covered in lava, it failed to assassinate Mariage Nightcap, and Karen's armed cruise ship blew up over half its supply and maintenance unit."

"Come to think of it, I guess they weren't exactly sitting around watching it all play out. The impact on their side was so great it doesn't feel real, though."

"Once the maintenance is complete, the Megalodiver has to head back out to sea, so wouldn't a human want to breathe some fresh air before that happened?"

"Perhaps, but a military is a management method for systematically killing people. Personal feelings and convenience won't come into it."

"For a proper military, no. But these are the remnants that managed to gather together after fleeing from the sinking Ame-no-Darin. The organizational structure will have collapsed. Even normal militaries rely on Objects to the point that Pilot Elites are treated extremely well, so they're probably treating the Elite like a queen on that island. After all, they're done for if the Elite abandons them."

"In that case, is the Megalodiver empty?"

"Whether this change of pace lasts five minutes or an hour depends on the specific Pilot Elite, but this is our chance. Luck is on our side."

The closest tanker wreckage to the island was lying on its side fifty meters from the island. To remain hidden from the infrared searchlights, Quenser's group tied the rubber boat behind the tanker and swam the rest of the way.

"Gasp gasp…. Dammit. The waves are huge here and I'm wearing all this clothing and heavy equipment. I-I'm not sure whether I'm swimming or drowning."

"If you're strength isn't going to last, you can always strip naked and backstroke the rest of the way. But don't throw away the equipment."

They somehow made it to the southern side of the island.

The information that no one lived there and the tanker dismantling harbor was located to the north proved accurate. Immediately past the coast of round stones was a damp tropical forest. The mountains referred to as the 'yolk' of a fried egg were only about two hundred meters tall.

"Let's go," said Heivia while adjusting his grip on his assault rifle. "Our objective is investigating the Megalodiver and interfering with the work to remove the hardened lava if possible. If the Elite really is cooling off outside the Object, we'll never have a better chance."

The landing team split into three groups and took different routes: one moving clockwise around the island, one counterclockwise, and one down the center of the mountain region .

They chose routes via rock-paper-scissors and Quenser and Heivia were stuck with the central mountain route.

Quenser had played rock-paper-scissors for his group, so they kicked him again.

"No using the radio from here on. Make your own decisions. We'll return at 0330 hours or when some idiot gives us away and we have to get the hell out of here. We won't wait for anyone who's late, so they'll have to deal with it themselves. Now go!"

On Heivia's command, the three groups started down their respective paths.

Quenser's group travelled through the central forest that was more like a jungle.

"Everything comes down to how you think about it, so let's try to stay positive. Heading through this thick forest makes it harder for them to find us."

"You can think positively if you like, but how about you start before we have to punch and kick you again?"

But once they actually entered the jungle covering the low mountain, they suddenly ran across something unexpected.

"What? The forest suddenly disappears."

It did not seem natural.

All the trees of an area were toppled over and blackened. They had been burned. Some small fires were still visible here and there.

"This was the Summer Vacation," groaned Heivia in utter annoyance. "Isn't the dismantling harbor on the north side? Firing so much it hits here is going too far even if some of the shots do hit ."

"Well, even a 20% hit rate is really good for artillery."

When they looked around again, they found thirty to forty meter craters scattered throughout the jungle. They travelled along while circling around those areas.

"That's a parabolic microphone. It's fallen over and useless, though."

"It looks like those maids were of some use."

Even if they were travelling over the mountain, they could not approach the peak. The large infrared searchlight was located there and it would have at least a few guards stationed at it. There was no point in fighting them and producing gunfire.

They circled around the peak and remained relatively low along the mountain ridge and took up a position where the northern dismantling harbor was visible.

"There it is. That's their base."

"The Object stands out the most. If it were using all its sensors, we would've been found by now."

"That must mean the Pilot Elite really is resting outside."

They did not even need to use binoculars.

A fifty meter mass floated on the black sea next to the crumbling concrete embankment. It was surrounded by makeshift scaffolding made of wires and bamboo. Bluish-white flashes of light were visible in places, but they were likely burners being used to strip away the hardened lava.

A few simple prefab buildings and barracks were located in the harbor area, but most of them had been blown away. That and the destroyed embankment were likely the result of Karen I Winchell's bombardment from the Summer Vacation.

"They're everywhere," groaned Heivia as he began observing the harbor through his scope. "If they can spare that many people for guard duty, they must have a decent amount of personnel. I don't see any sign of a tragic lack of food or ammunition or anything."

"Does that mean someone's supporting them?"

"Who knows. But there sure are a lot of white and black people for an Island Nation force. What happened to the Nadeshiko with long, straight, and black hair?"

"The self-defense PMC was supposed to be a collection of foreign mercenaries."

Quenser used his binoculars to see for himself, but then he stopped.

He instead focused on the great darkness lurking around the harbor.

"Hm? There are a few ships in addition to the Object. Are those subs?"

"They're probably carrying supplies and maintenance equipment for the people. Before the Island Nation made a ton of money off of the resources at the bottom of the Pacific, they did a bunch of research on maintaining an ocean supply line. I think they called it the Ghost Fleet Project. This might be a remnant of that."

"Another cool name for a project. It makes me want to laugh."

"They spent billions of euros on the thing, so they're not going to give it a pathetic name," pointed out Heivia. "The submarine mother ship project being worked on by the Faith Organization was probably influenced by this. The Island Nation's ideas really are leaking out."

"Heivia, I want to be clear about something. This Ghost Fleet Project wasn't supplying the self-defense PMC defending the Ame-no-Darin, was it?"

"Of course not. With all the ocean resources available now, they don't need to bother with a method of transporting them long distances through the ocean."

"So someone called back these retired transport subs? Are you sure the remnants of the self-defense PMC that fled from the Ame-no-Darin are our only enemy here?"

A lot bothered Quenser, but their time was limited. The Object came first. They could take plenty of time to safely consider everything else after the Megalodiver had been sunk.

There were a few pieces of information they wanted:

- The Tatami Shield or Hiding Clothes of Water increased the viscosity of the seawater and then produced giant pillars of water to deflect enemy cannon fire. Raising the seawater's viscosity was fine, but that would affect the seawater it used for its water jet propulsion, its reactor cooling, and its oxygen supply secured via electrolysis. How did it allow those elements to coexist?

- When they had run across it in the deep sea, the Megalodiver had presumably used a water intake on the top, but it had continued using the systems requiring seawater after surfacing. Did it have another water intake on the bottom? What was the condition for switching?

- The Tatami Shield defense system was overwhelmingly accurate. Simply relying on sound would not allow it to keep

up with ultra-high speed laser beams, so how was it so accurately grasping its surroundings amid all the noise?

Those unseen systems were directly related to the Object functioning. If they could find the answers and interfere, they could literally suffocate it.

"Where should we attack first?"

"The other units are heading in on their own paths, so we should avoid anything too noticeable. Bring an interception antenna here. Let's start by picking up all the wireless LAN signals flying around the area."

"Won't the military encryption be hard to crack?"

"This is the same as with the Pilot Elite. They aren't maintaining a proper military structure, so they're probably using a system made from a bunch of civilian equipment they could gather together. It might not be too hard to intercept and analyze."

While complaining, Quenser set up a 40cm long and 10cm wide metal cylinder on a tripod. It was not a rocket launcher or any other weapon. Just like a parabolic antenna, this was an antenna used to pick up weak signals.

Heivia looked doubtful.

"I heard that's an improvised piece of equipment thrown together just before we left. Are you sure it'll work, student?"

"It's a hell of a lot safer than sneaking into the middle of the enemy base. Just leave it to me. I can intercept wireless LAN signals using a plastic bottle cut in half and wrapped in aluminum foil. It's a much simpler design than a parabolic microphone."

"Why do you know all these tricks?"

"This was popular back in my safe country school. Yandere girls would use it to peek at the emails of people they had decided were their boyfriend. Unlike hacking, this doesn't require any specialized knowledge, so it's often used to target Wi-Fi and Bluetooth."

"Honestly, you STEM students."

"It wasn't that bad a place. A girl in the sciences sounds rarer than a normal girl, but all the girls in the school were like that. Upperclassmen, underclassmen, all of them."

"If you know that many, introduce me to some of them! An army of girls in glasses and lab coats sounds like a dream come true!!"

"If you want. Their defenses are weak, but they jump to conclusions way too fast. If you just think you're having some fun, it can come back to bite you. You'll start to think a girl wielding a knife is downright cute when you have to deal with one's using homemade railguns or thermobaric bombs. Don't forget the E in STEM."

Quenser used a thin cable to attach the bottom of the cylinder to his handheld device and carefully rotated the top of the tripod. It looked like he was pointing the open end of the cylinder toward a target computer a few hundred meters away. The inbox quickly began to fill with new emails. They were various communications and reports travelling through the harbor.

Heivia looked even less pleased than before.

"That's scary. Maybe I should put a free encryption app on my phone."

"Those always have a backdoor. More importantly, I've got a few emails we can read right away."

Quenser opened the emails, but he did not hit the jackpot right away. Standard reports from guards, shift times for maintenance soldiers, and even some stupid jokes and pranks were being sent around as well.

"What's this? World weather forecasts, ocean currents, and… they've even got the Island Nation's food self-sufficiency rate in here. What does this have to do with the Megalodiver?"

"It doesn't look like they were just downloading the ocean and weather maps for their upcoming battles, does it? If so, the New Caledonia District would've been enough. They wouldn't need to know about the other side of the globe."

"The Island Nation is part of the Capitalist Corporations. They aren't trading grain futures on the battlefield, are they?"

Heivia looked at the cell phone with disbelief in his eyes.

"Is this really okay?"

"The lack of regulation shows how far they've fallen. All the jokes are likely mental defenses to distract them. Anyway, look at this."

Quenser was focused on the email address rather than the contents of the email.

Heivia looked confused, so the student explained.

"A lot of different groups are making contact, but most of them are gathering at a single address. They're asking for instructions and this…what? Someone going by Ichirei Shikon is at the center of it all."

"Ichirei…? What's that?"

"I don't know. It's probably a term unique to the Island Nation. You might need to know about Buddhism or Shintoism to understand."

At any rate, it was almost certain that this Ichirei Shikon was at the center of the incident.

The self-defense PMC was a puppet and worker ant that seemed to ask for instructions via email, but the wireless network was limited to the island. Ichirei Shikon was likely commanding them on the scene.

Heivia used his assault rifle's scope to observe various parts of the harbor.

"This Ichirei Shikon would be their central person, right?"

"Most likely. They're using some confusing Island Nation term for a codename while dealing with a bunch of foreign mercenaries, so they probably have some weird pride. I think we can assume they're the person in the Island Nation responsible for all this. It also fits with those old transport submarines being used."

"Do the emails not say where they are? Since they're from the Island Nation, should we assume they're short with black hair?"

"Not necessarily. Changes in their food culture has led to a bunch of giant kids attending their schools and I hear they dye their hair all sorts of colors and even their skin color can change depending on whether white skin or black skin is in at the moment . More importantly, we need information more than a person. We need to find a weakness in the Megalodiver that Ichirei Shikon built."

"But wouldn't it be fastest to capture this Ichirei Shikon person and get them to tell us?"

"That would stand out too much."

As they chatted, they looked through the mountain of new emails displayed on the handheld device.

They found a few emails concerning the Object, but none of them touched on its secrets.

Instead, they gained some unwelcome information about the maintenance.

"Wow. This isn't good."

"What is it?"

"They're going to finish removing the lava from the Megalodiver way sooner than we thought. According to this, in about twenty minutes."

"We only just started our investigation! If Armageddon begins that soon, the princess doesn't stand a chance and we'll be annihilated!!"

"Yes, and that's why we need to interfere with their work somehow."

As he spoke, Quenser reached for his backpack.

When he pulled out some Hand Axe plastic explosive and an electric fuse, his partner's eyelids twitched.

"Wait a minute. What are you planning to do?"

"They're using high-temperature acetylene burners to remove the cooled lava, so there has to be a huge tank below the Object near the crumbling embankment. Let's blow it up and make it look like an accident."

"Do you have any idea how noticeable that'll be!? We're supposed to be gathering information, not slaughtering them! They have an Object, so they'll blow us to pieces if we do that!!"

"Karen and the other maids fired shells all over the place, remember? There have to be cracks and dents all over. If a gas tank explodes, they won't think it was done maliciously."

If they could not use the acetylene burners, they could not continue removing the cooled lava from the Object. That extra time to gather information would give them a chance to find a weakness in the Megalodiver.

Quenser placed his handheld device in the grass.

"Heivia, you look after this and the antenna."

"Seriously? You're seriously going!? Even if we're just dealing with Ichirei Shikon and the remnants of the self-defense PMC, it's still a bunch of enemies. If they notice something's wrong, they'll send the Pilot Elite to the Megalodiver. If they so much as catch a glimpse of you, it's all over. Are you still going!?"

"If we don't do something, the Megalodiver will head back out into the ocean. Once it can dive and fight on the surface, it'll defeat

the princess, sink the fleet, and leave us stranded. Don't worry. The gas tank is on the embankment. If I continue through the dark ocean with only my head above water, I can manage. I won't be pressing against building walls like a ninja or anything."

"No matter what you do, they aren't gonna make a movie about you. There's no reason for you to risk your life like this! Ah! Wait, you idiot!!"

Heivia stubbornly tried to stop him, but Quenser ignored him and slowly approached the harbor with explosive in hand.

Part 7

Left all alone, Heivia started feeling jealous.

He left the handheld device and homemade cylindrical antenna sitting next to him. His assault rifle's scope had enough sensors to make a decent mid-range sniper rifle and he followed Quenser's progress with it.

"Oh, damn. I can see you. I can totally see you, idiot. You're completely visible!! That blond hair shows up way too well in the black sea. If they shine a flashlight on you, you're dead."

A few hundred meters away, Quenser travelled along the embankment extending out into the ocean and slowly approached an outcropping with only his head visible.

Heivia saw no one on the embankment itself, but plenty of people were walking about on the scaffolding surrounding the

Object. If they shined their light into the ocean on a whim, it was all over.

Quenser was about thirty meters from the acetylene tank.

(Isn't there something I can do, dammit? Running after him wouldn't help.)

Heivia cursed in his heart, but there was nothing to do.

He gave up and glanced toward Quenser's handheld device left on the ground. New emails were continuing to pour in. The screen was filled with the "unread" mark and reading through them all would be exhausting.

Deciding to do what work he could, he opened a few of the emails.

"!!"

He then stiffened.

He grabbed his assault rifle again, left the handheld device and cylindrical antenna where they were, and slid down the slope in front of him. He moved to a spot from which he could see inside the window of one of the small barracks.

He had reacted to one of the emails.

(The Pilot Elite is resting in Building B's simple lodging facility? If that information is legit, I can end this now! If I snipe that one Elite, no one can move the Megalodiver!!)

Banning radio contact between allies to keep the enemy from noticing him had worked against them. If they had been able to share that information, they might have been able to target the Elite from multiple angles.

He quickly located Building B.

Only one of the barracks had light in the window.

(I have to do what I can.)

He lay on the slope and peered inside Building B's window using the assault rifle's scope.

Quenser would blow up the acetylene tank soon, so he would use that timing.

During an explosion, a human would reflexively curl up. Lightning and gunshots produced the same reaction. There was a danger of his target's position suddenly changing, but this was currently the best method of getting the shot without exposing his fellow soldiers to danger.

(My only choice is to use my sensors to cover the expected evasion point. Fortunately, the only cover is the barrack's run-down walls. Even if the Elite hides from the window, a rifle bullet can still reach them.)

While making general plans, he removed the sensors that were attached to the barrel like a bayonet. He stabbed a nearby fallen tree branch into the ground and used the fishing line in his

survival kit to tie the sensors on. He was using the machine as a replacement for a sniper's spotter.

(It's two floors, so which is the Elite on? They have to be in that building somewhere.)

He looked from window to window through the scope, but then he stopped.

Light came from one window on the second story and he could see a feminine silhouette inside.

(The Elite!!)

His index finger jumped to the trigger for an instant, but he then remembered he did not have a silencer equipped. He did not know where his allies were hiding and gathering information, so he had to avoid any gunshots if possible.

(If I fire during the acetylene explosion, it'll hide the gunshot. Hurry, Quenser! She's going to leave the window!!)

The Megalodiver's Elite appeared to be a tall Asian. She was a woman with long, glossy black hair, but her silhouette appeared more nimble than voluptuous. The special suit covering every inch of her body was white with characteristic red lines. It may have been designed after the Island Nation's flag before the country lost its name.

(An Asian woman. Is she from the Island Nation? If so, could she be Ichirei Shikon?)

She was frighteningly beautiful, but it would all be over if he shot her.

They would no longer need to come up with a weakness in the Megalodiver. Without worrying about the enemy intercepting it, they could radio a report of the Elite's death to Frolaytia and the princess's Baby Magnum would take care of the rest.

He wanted to fire right then and there.

He wanted to fire and be freed from the extreme tension.

He had to use the full strength of his rational mind to hold those almost animalistic instincts at bay.

Doing that would put his allies in danger. When a huge opportunity was dangled before your eyes, you had to avoid any impulsive actions.

For those reasons, he decided to wait, but then his eye narrowed as he looked through the scope.

Through the window, the Asian Elite suddenly unzipped her special suit.

"Nuhh!!"

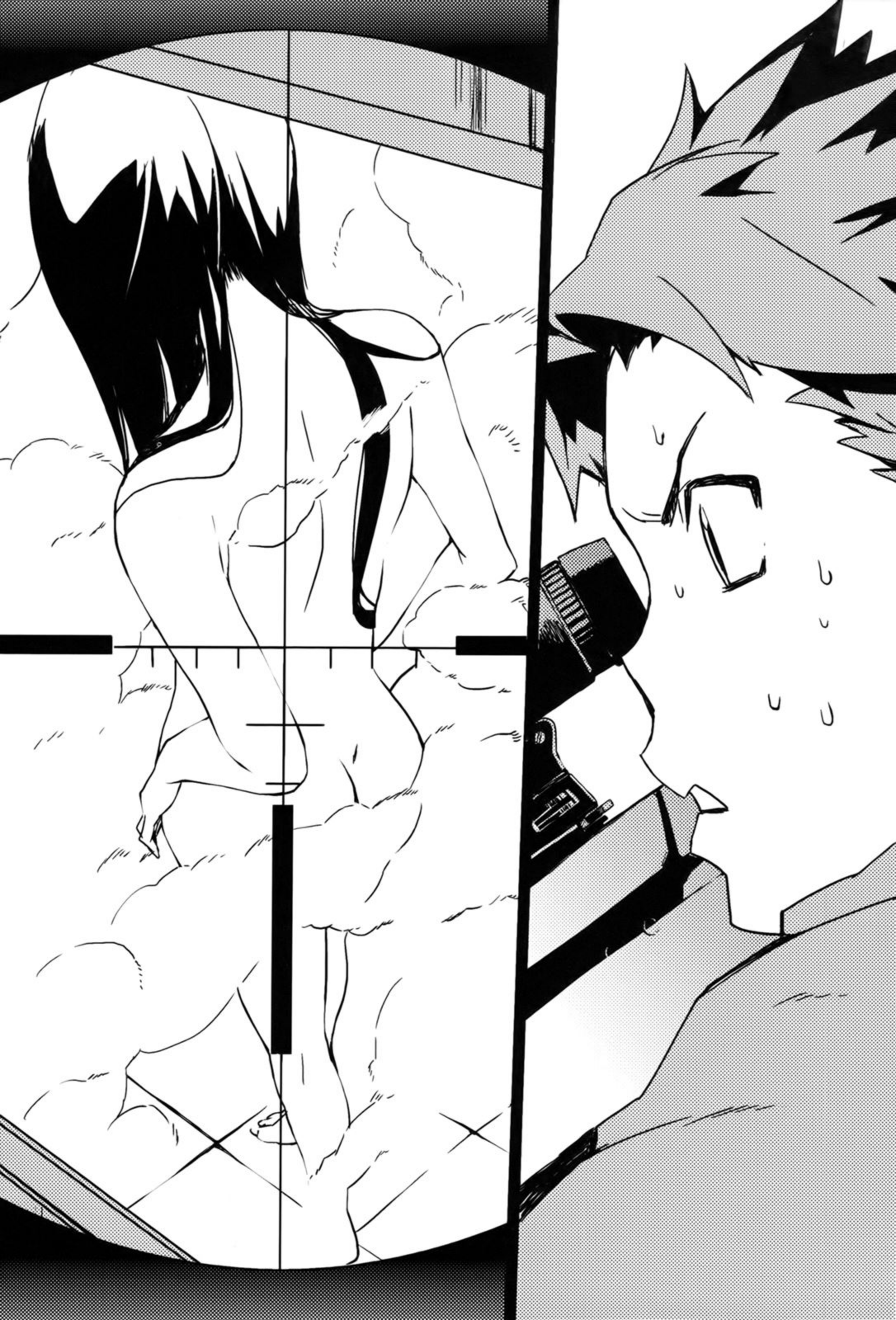
He let out a groan like an elderly martial artist.

He looked more closely and spotted a clothes hamper and washing machine in the room.

Meanwhile, the black-haired Elite stripped down to nothing at all. Without suspecting that a professionally-trained soldier was expertly peeping on her, she entered the neighboring shower room .

That room's window also had the curtains fully open.

The rumors that the Island Nation's hot springs had a unique culture of steam-filled bath scenes seemed to be true.



He could not hear anything from where he was, but she appeared to be humming.

"I-I guess I should wait a little longer. I can kill her at any time! Firing now would expose my allies to danger!!"

His motivations were 500% different from half a minute ago and his eyes were completely bloodshot.

But when he thought about it rationally, burning the image of the Elite's naked body into his memory would not end well. He would soon be blowing away the head he could see through the scope, so his memories would all be of that smashed head. A sniper was forced to see a zoomed-up image of that instant.

The situation gradually grew harder to bear.

While lying on the ground, he force back tears and almost hung his head.

"Ahhhhh… The battlefield is starting to depress me."

Supposedly, a sniper always worked with a spotter for both the simple technical reasons and to lessen the feeling of guilt when firing. The absence of the annoying student was working against him.

He looked away from the scope without thinking, but he recalled his job and started to look back.

But that mistake proved fortunate.

He noticed something in the instant he looked away from the scope.

(What is that?)

Heivia moved his assault rifle's scope a bit from the Elite showering on the second floor of Building B and he closely examined something.

An Asian woman wearing a white and red special suit was walking outside. He could see her eating dumplings on a skewer.

"There are two Elites?"

He moved his scope around the dismantling harbor some more and spotted more women in special suits that were clearly different from the normal soldier uniform. A quick count showed more than five and he would likely find even more if he checked inside the barracks.

A single Object had a single Pilot Elite.

That was a standard of the industry.

Some built an Object for an Elite and some trained an Elite for an Object, but there was no such thing as "generic" when it came to controlling the ultimate weapon with the optimal movements.

He had never heard of multiple Elites taking turns piloting a single Object.

But then how did he explain the scene before his eyes?

What did it mean?

(The Island Nation can be strange, so did they develop a generic Object that can achieve consistent results when piloted by any Elite that's gone through a set training program?)

That was indeed a frightening idea, but there was a more likely option.

(No, Quenser said the Megalodiver is empty. That's why it hasn't detected us with its large-scale sound sensors. We guessed the Elite was cooling off after so much time in that cramped cockpit at the bottom of the ocean, but if there are more than one Elite, they could just put another one in.)

In that case…

(Are they nothing more than body doubles!? It would be best to assume there's a single real one that can pilot the Object!!)

There was only one.

If that one was killed, Ichirei Shikon and the self-defense PMC would be destroyed. That gave them a good reason to prepare body doubles. That would protect against enemy attack and an ally panicking in the extreme situation and taking her hostage.

That left a single question.

(Which one is the real Elite?)

It was an extremely simple question.

(Is the one showering in Building B the real one? Or is it one of the ones walking around? Dammit. If they're doing it deceive their allies too, I can't rely on the email. We can't relax unless we kill all of them!!)

Heivia and the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were split into several units and monitoring the harbor, but it would be difficult to simultaneously shoot all of the Elites without close radio contact.

If he could not distinguish real from fake, this opportunity would go to waste.

(Or should I just wait?)

He started to panic, so he intentionally calmed his thoughts.

(Either way, the real Elite will eventually board the Megalodiver. It might be best to shoot her then. Shit!! But Quenser blowing up the acetylene tank will get in the way of that. It's faster to let them finish the work and have the Elite board the Object!!)

As he thought, the situation advanced further than he expected.

A brilliant flash of light covered the embankment.

Quenser had blown up the acetylene tank with his Hand Axe.

The darkness of the night transformed to pure white for an instant.

The explosion looked like a flash grenade multiplied several times.

That would produce a commotion much like poking a hornet's nest, but it did not end there.

The real problem came next.

Heivia heard the sound of cracking glass.

He looked over and saw a small hole in Building B's second floor shower room window. It looked like someone had jabbed at the glass with the tip of an umbrella and the inside of the glass was stained red.

Heivia had not done it.

One of his allies hiding somewhere in the harbor had made the shot.

(You dumbass!! We don't know if that's the real one or not!!)

The situation had gone too far.

The blood coating the lit window would be obvious from the outside. What looked like an accidental tank explosion had been elevated to an obvious attack.

Heivia switched on his radio and shouted into it.

"Retreat! Goddammit!! If that wasn't the real one, the Megalodiver is going to be moving soon!!"

There was no more point in hiding.

He quickly stood and ran up the slope as quickly as he could to hide in the trees.

On the way, he grabbed Quenser's handheld device and cylindrical antenna and hid in the tall underbrush.

He observed the embankment through his scope.

Quenser was slowly travelling along the embankment with just his head exposed, but the acetylene explosion had wiped away the darkness.

The unexpected situation had the enemy focusing on everything rather than just the exploded tank.

They would eventually find him like this.

(Shit!! You'd damn well better be thankful for Heivia the transcendentally smart, beautiful, rich and athletic noble! I'll blow away the saying that bad things happen to honest people!!)

After clenching his teeth and gathering strength and resolve in his gut, he targeted a group of soldiers standing near the base of the embankment.

The first shot was a direct hit on one and he fired a few more shots into the soldiers as they frantically scattered.

He doubted any of those shots were direct hits, but he only needed to divert attention away from the coast and toward the mountain.

That would save foolish Quenser.

He was answered with repeated gunfire.

They were a few hundred meters away. If his bullets could reach them, theirs could reach him.

"Dammit!! This isn't good!!"

He frantically crouched down as a bullet struck quite nearby. His only option was to run away as quickly as he could.

He heard a few sounds resembling champagne corks being removed.

"The bastards are using mortars!?"

Explosives flew in a large arc and fell from the night sky.

Tremendous explosions tore trees from the ground and sent them flying through the air. A safe and clean battlefield was nowhere to be found. Covered in sand and dirt, Heivia poured all his strength into running through the mountain.

Part 8

As he travelled along the embankment with only his head sticking above the dark sea, Quenser was horrified by the poked hornet's nest of motion above.

(Wh-what!? Why are they shooting? Did someone mess up!?)

The Legitimacy Kingdom shot that had killed the beautiful (possible) Elite had occurred at the same time as the acetylene tank explosion, so he had not heard it. He was suspicious because of the random firing from the mountain. In other words, he suspected Heivia who was actually putting his life on the line to allow him to escape.

Gratitude could only be felt by someone smart enough to realize what had been done for them.

At any rate, if the enemy had discovered them, they had to leave the island as soon as possible.

As Quenser hurried yet moved carefully enough to not cause any splashing, a transmission arrived at his radio.

"Shit! We screwed up. Thanks to some idiot's sniper shot, the several Elites are being led to the Megalodiver by their bodyguards. If we don't get the hell out of here, that monster will be on the move!!"

"Several? Sniper shot!? I don't get what's going on! What did you do, Heivia!?"

"I didn't take the shot, you idiot! Oh, damn. They aren't hesitating. That must mean the one that died in the shower room was a body double!"

This commotion meant the attempt to disguise the acetylene tank explosion as an accident had been for nothing.

They would have difficulty gathering any more information.

The most they had accomplished was forcing the Megalodiver out with the lava removal incomplete. That meant it still could not dive as it clashed with the Baby Magnum on the surface.

(But the Baby Magnum won't be able to do any damage thanks to the Hiding Clothes of Water, dammit!)

"Heivia! What does my handheld device say? It should've been automatically stealing their wireless LAN signals, so did it grab anything useful!?"

"This thing's got hundreds of emails! I've got the unit itself, but we'll have to wait for things to calm down before looking through it. They're firing mortars at me right now!! Oh, that was close!"

Static filled the transmission and it cut out.

As far as Quenser could tell, Heivia and the others had strayed from the intelligence gathering mission and attempted to shoot the Pilot Elite outside the Object. But this was the result. He wanted to tell them that slow and steady wins the race.

At any rate, he needed to leave the ocean, climb the mountain, and reach the rendezvous point on the opposite side of the island. If Heivia and the others who had left earlier decided to give up on him and withdrew the rubber boats, he would be stranded on the island.

(Those cowards might actually do it.)

With that in mind, he slowly travelled along the embankment and toward land.

Before even making it a meter further, he heard a sound from directly overhead.

He looked up and found someone peering down from the top of the embankment. They were naturally doing so through a carbine's sight.

"Uuh!?" groaned Quenser.

With no warning, he clearly saw the man's index finger move.

A moment later, a few muffled gunshots rang out.

However, they did not belong to the soldier targeting Quenser. His gun had no silencer.

After the soldier lost his balance and fell into the ocean, someone else ran across the embankment while keeping low.

It was a female soldier wearing a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform and holding an assault rifle with a grenade launcher attached

below the barrel. Even when excluding the silencer on the end, the barrel seemed a little longer than the other soldiers' guns.

"Hurry on up! You aren't going to survive on that route either way!!"

"Th-thanks."

For some reason, the female soldier averted her gaze.

"Sorry. I can't accept your thanks. I was the one that got carried away and fired the sniper shot."

"…"

Quenser found a wonderful new reason to survive this: punishment time. He could not allow himself to die here no matter what.

He grabbed the proffered hand, climbed up onto the embankment, and ran toward land.

As soon as they approached the harbor, they heard a great number of footsteps, so they leaned against the wall of a nearby warehouse.

At least twenty soldiers passed very nearby and they wore a mixture of normal uniforms and the special suits of a Pilot Elite.

"Wh-what was that!?"

"Shh. It seems they have body double Elites in addition to the real one. In fact, they have a few dozen of them."

"That must be why they didn't look all that beautiful up close. They seemed like cheap knock-offs."

The base of the short mountain was not far away. Even from their position, the scent of the dense greenery could be detected in the salty sea air. Once the group of enemy soldiers finished running by, they could run over and hide in the forest.

However, an unpleasant sound ruined that plan.

The sound came from the warehouse they were leaning up against.

"What was that? It sounded like a bunch of thick metal fitting together."

"What is it?"

"Shit. This is really bad! On my signal, break that window. I'll throw an explosive in as you do!"

"You're causing a commotion here!?"

"The sounds on the other side of the wall are powered suits being put on. Once they're finished, who do you think they'll chase after first!?"

The female soldier asked no further questions.

She broke the window with her rifle's stock and Quenser leaned over to toss in a Hand Axe explosive with an electric fuse attached.

"Run!!"

As soon as they left the wall, several gazes stabbed into the two of them.

But before the enemy soldiers' carbines could accurately target them, Quenser hit the switch on his radio.

A tremendous explosion blew down all four giant walls of the warehouse like it was a magic box.

The unexpected blast knocked the soldiers to the concrete.

Quenser had been prepared, but even he was almost knocked over. The female soldier grabbed his arm and they ran for the nearby forest.

Gunshots pursued them, but the shaken soldiers were in no state to aim accurately. That just barely kept the two of them alive.

"We can't use the obvious shortest route," warned the female soldier. "We'll run into the enemy if we do!"

"If we use up too much time, Heivia and the others will leave!"

"I'll make sure we still get there in time. Follow me!!"

The two of them continued running through the trees. Occasionally, the student would stab an electric fuse into a clay-like bomb so it could be detonated by radio and randomly threw it into a thicket.

The female soldier took issue with that as they ran.

"If you set traps, they can follow them. It's like laying a trail of bread crumbs through the forest!"

"I'm sure they have skilled trackers and scouts who can find us either way! We can't escape while worrying about footprints in the dirt, trampled blades of grass, and broken branches. We're going to leave a trail regardless, so it's better to leave some traps too!!"

They continued to make progress through the forest and its hot and humid air.

Suddenly, they heard a loud sound of breaking branches in front of them.

Something much larger than a human was approaching.

"Shit! They figured out our path. They had an infrared searchlight facility at the mountain peak, so the security team probably radioed them for help. We've been cut off!!"

"Wait… What is that!?"

"A powered suit. Hide!!"

Quenser immediately grabbed the female soldier's arm, pulled her toward him, and jumped behind a large, mossy tree that looked like it would be the home of fairies.

The attack came an instant later.

It began with an eerie, flickering flame that resembled a will-o'-the-wisp.

Then a blended fuel mist made from mixing an oxidant with napalm was sprayed their way.

With a roar, tremendous flames split apart the darkness of the night and swept across the warm, damp forest for around thirty meters. That murderous flame would not be extinguished even if water was dumped on it and sand covered it.

The world was dyed orange.

"A flamethrower!!" groaned the female soldier in his arms.

The straight line of flame was five meters away because it had been fired in the wrong direction, but Quenser still felt a sizzling pain on his skin even through the thick military uniform. It felt like a bad sunburn.

"We can't do anything against this. They can continue firing that flame indefinitely and my rifle can't pierce its armor. Facing it will just get us burned to death!"

"We can't circle around on a different route. We'll be caught by all the pursuers from the harbor," said Quenser as he wiped sweat from his face. "Fire a grenade on my signal."

"An anti-personnel frag grenade won't get through its armor!"

"We're not targeting the powered suit."

He pointed at the feet of the humanoid armor weapon that was producing the flickering will-o'-the-wisp.

"Blow away the ground. The earth is wet here, we're on a mountain slope, and powered suits have poor balance. If you gouge out the ground below its feet, it'll topple over."

As he spoke, he reached into his backpack and pulled out a Hand Axe plastic explosive.

"Then I'll walk right up to it and attach this. We only have one chance! Do it!!"

The rest was a complete mess.

The grenade blasted a large amount of dirt into the air. Quenser ran through the earthy smell, ignored the creaking of the powered suit, and tossed the clay toward the back of the metal mass that had fallen face forward. The instant he hit the switch on his radio, he heard an explosion and he was tossed a few meters through the air. By the time he realized he had detonated it too soon, the taste of iron had already filled his mouth.

A moment later, the tank on the powered suit's back exploded and Quenser was very nearly fried.

"Wah!?"

The female soldier whose name he did not know helped him up and the two of them ran as quickly as they could. The trees of the forest shook around them and they could not tell whether they were hearing the night wind or approaching enemies.

Soon, the salty wind reached their noses once more.

As soon as they left the forest, a few dry gunshots filled the air.

But they had come from ahead rather than the pursuers behind them.

The female soldier tried to grab Quenser's arm and stop.

"They cut us off!?"

"No, it's Heivia and the others. They waited for us!!"

A few rubber boats sat on the harsh coast. They had originally been hidden behind a tanker, so they must have been brought to the island just now.

Heivia shouted out while aiming his assault rifle behind Quenser and using his sensors to detect something unseen.

"Hurry it up! They're right behind you!!"

Enemy and ally both fired shoulder-fired missiles.

With the explosive blasts beating on their backs, Quenser and the female soldier almost fell several times as they continued running.

After their comrades pulled them onto the boats, all of the rubber boats set out into the dark ocean.

But they had no time to relax.

All of a sudden, the mountain in the center of the island flashed as if it had suddenly melted. A blinding light stabbed into their eyes and its silhouette crumbled.

“The Object!!” shouted Quenser.

“Get behind the tanker! Hurry up and hide!! Shut off the motors !!”

Just as the rubber boats circled behind the rusty tanker, the mountain itself vanished.

An orange afterimage stabbed into Quenser’s retinas after it was all already over. The reverberation of the laser beam crashing diagonally into the seawater sounded like water simmering in a heated frying pan.

“Dammit,” said Heivia in irritation. “They’ve forced the Megalodiver to start moving.”

"But it still has the cooled lava all over it. They hadn't finished removing it."

"What does it matter? It might have simply decided to swat the flies that were annoying it. It can definitely overwhelm us while only fighting on the surface."

With that giant machine on the move, Quenser and the others would have a difficult time returning to the fleet. The ocean was the Megalodiver's territory. Without a doubt, it would locate and sink every single rubber boat before they made it back.

And even if they did return to the fleet, it had the firepower needed to blow away the entire fleet as well. Arriving at the goal would not change the situation in the slightest.

"What do we do? Really! What do we do!?"

"Staying on the ocean isn't going to help. Let's head inside the rusty tanker. That thing can hear well enough to detect an individual by their heartbeat, so it would be best to hide inside a metal box."

The rusty tanker they hid behind had large holes in places, so they used one to enter the dark ruins that had no illumination. Not wanting to enter the water, they climbed a random staircase and took up a position along a central corridor.

"Our only choice is to have the princess's Baby Magnum do something," said Quenser.

"You've already seen how well that'll work! She can't do anything with that strange Tatami Shield!"

"We were gathering information to find a way through it, remember? If we bring together all the data we found, we might figure something out."

Once the Megalodiver circled around the perimeter of the island , it would set its sights on the fleet out at sea. They had to inform the princess and Frolaytia of a weakness in the Megalodiver before it could directly target them. The most they could do was create a situation in which the Object would be defeated when it attacked.

Heivia gave Quenser the handheld device he had been left with.

"We've got a huge mixture of data. You saw it, too. The emails contained global weather maps, ocean current maps, and files on the food production of the Island Nation. It's going to take forever to find the information related to the Megalodiver."

They then heard a rustling noise.

Once they pointed their lights toward it, they saw another unit placing papers on the rusty floor. Surprisingly, it seemed they had actually entered a building and stolen paper reports rather than intercepting transmissions from a distance.

"The Twelve Earthly Branches Project? Why would they have data on the twelve original Objects?"

"From what I've heard it was just the Rat branch that actually brought an end to the nuclear age. When just one caused that much damage, it had to have frightened everyone to learn they still had eleven more of them in reserve. Of course, all twelve of them were sunk in the upheaval afterwards."

Others also produced sound files that recorded the conversations of self-defense PMC soldiers and ultra-long distance photographs of maps on the walls.

"Ksshh! Salvage…"

"Reactivate…ksshhhhhhh!!"

"Ksshhh… Control tower… ksshhhhhhh!!"

Quenser persistently manipulated his handheld device and opened the hundreds or even thousands of various new emails.

"What? It looks like it isn't just chaos."

"What are you talking about?"

"The conversations on here. I had thought they were all unrelated topics, but it looks like there are a few common themes: weather, ocean currents, and food."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, but I can't be sure since I haven't checked all of the emails yet."

For one thing, most of the emails were the hired self-defense PMC asking for instructions from the individual going by Ichirei Shikon who had hired them.

For that reason, it was odd to think the emails were overflowing with idle conversation.

"Wait a second."

Quenser glanced at one of the image files a soldier had presented.

It was one of the ultra-long distance photographs of a map on a wall.

"Heivia."

"What is it?"

"The original twelve Objects created for the Twelve Earthly Branches Project were all sunk in the end, right?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"It looks to me like there are twelve points marked on this world map."

They all gathered around, but the previous female soldier frowned.

"What? These are nowhere near the same locations I've seen in history textbooks. They're all at the bottom of the ocean, but the end of the early days of Objects didn't happen in these places."

"Then is this map complete nonsense?"

"No," cut in Quenser. "The audio files included the word ' salvage', remember?"

"You can't be serious."

"Their specialty is the ocean. Specifically, the bottom of the ocean." Quenser chose his words carefully. "Most likely, the self-defense PMC…no, Ichirei Shikon who's acting as their brain has been spending a long time salvaging the original twelve Objects. Then they were relocated to the points on this map."

"But why!?"

"I have a guess, but it's a bit of a far-fetched idea."

Part 9

Quenser spoke within the tanker that was covered in reddish brown rust.

"The Megalodiver probably isn't just a weapon all on its own. It 's nothing more than the brain or the control tower."

"You mean that monster can still grow arms and legs?"

"It's inherited the legacy of the original twelve Objects of the Twelve Earthly Branches Project."

"You aren't saying those things have been fixed up and secretly scattered throughout the world's oceans, are you?" Heivia sounded skeptical. "That wouldn't work. For one thing, they're early first generations. They may be legendary, but they're no more valuable than the original salt ramen. A cutting edge second generation could destroy each of them in about ten minutes. If all twelve attacked at once, it'd be pretty dangerous, but they've been scattered around the world. That gives them no chance of winning."

"That's not what I'm saying. Remember, the Megalodiver is the only one that can dive. Even if they fixed up the original twelve, they couldn't place them at the bottom of the ocean."

"Then what? Are they reusing them in some other way? Don't tell me they've taken out the twelve reactors to make twelve more Megalodivers."

"It's possible, but I doubt Ichirei Shikon has the funds for that. They wouldn't be able to keep the information from leaking out either. After all, it took sacrificing the Ame-no-Darin to complete the first Megalodiver."

"Wait a second. Then what are you trying to say?"

"Heivia, you touched on the answer a moment ago."

Quenser paused for a second while being all too aware just how far-fetched an idea it was.

"They probably only needed the reactors. If they removed those from the twelve salvaged Objects, they would only need to give them a shell able to withstand the water pressure at those depths. I doubt there was any real reason to make them into Objects."

"What? But then they wouldn't be a weapon! There's no point in scattering those around the world's oceans!!"

"There is," corrected Quenser while withstanding a headache. " Look. This is the attached file from that email about ocean currents ."

"And?"

"Next, look at the world map from the wall. Can you tell where the twelve reactors have been placed?"

"Ah," said the previous female soldier. "They're all at points where multiple currents run together."

"Yes. Warm and cool currents mix together. So what if they were intentionally placing reactors at points like that?" Quenser tapped the screen of his handheld device. "Heivia, have you ever heard of the ocean temperature rising due to global warming or whatever? Have you heard how that causes more frequent

typhoons, hurricanes, and other abnormal weather? And have you heard how it unnaturally distorts the large westerlies that determine the weather around the world?"

"Wait… You don't mean…"

"JPlevelMHD reactors produce a ridiculous amount of heat. After all, they're constantly producing enough energy to move a 200 thousand ton hunk of metal at over 500 kph. What if you dumped those at the bottom of the ocean and let them freely emit heat? And what if you did that at the points of colliding hot and cold currents which are sensitive and important points for the weather?"

Quenser almost groaned as he spoke.

"A global weather control weapon."

He spoke that definitive term.

"If I had to give it a name, that would probably be best. By freely increasing or decreasing the ocean temperature around the world, this gigantic system can indirectly control seasonal winds and westerlies and therefore freely change the weather conditions of any region around the world. They can change a barren desert into a tropical rainforest or transform the world's greatest grain producing region into a land of ice. If they can complete this and it works…"

Twelve Object reactors alone would not be enough.

For example, electromagnetic signals did not travel through the ocean well. Even if a wired antenna buoy was extended to the surface, it could not reach the other side of the globe. A large-scale satellite communication network would be needed to communicate between the Megalodiver and the antenna buoys of the twelve reactors.

Also, how would they monitor the world's weather in real time and control the reactors accurately? How much of an effect would it have on the world's finances and economies? A data infrastructure would be needed to know all that in enough detail.

All those preparations had been advancing without being seen.

Outside of the wars, this plan had been creeping across the planet.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait!! All that is nothing but speculation. You 're saying Ichirei Shikon is trying to turn the earth into a desert planet using abnormal weather!? The destruction's on too great a scale to use as a weapon! What's in it for them!?"

"Food production. More simply put: self-sufficiency."

Quenser let out a heavy breath and chose to continue on.

"The emails also discussed self-sufficiency. It seems the Island Nation's food self-sufficiency is around 30%. If all trade were stopped, two-thirds of them would starve to death. The resources they found at the bottom of the ocean let them be self-sufficient with fuel, but food is still a problem. It isn't that hard to think

Ichirei Shikon…no, the Island Nation would try to do something about it."

The female soldier frowned.

"They can turn an enemy nation into a desert and friendly nations fertile. Or they can threaten to do that to prevent anyone from letting them import food. Is that their plan?"

"Probably. Unless Ichirei Shikon wants everyone to starve together, they'll be fighting to produce even more food."

"B-but…" Heivia gave a disturbingly thin smile. "They've done nothing more than place exposed reactors in the world's oceans. They aren't cutting-edge Objects, s-so can't we just report this to our huge-breasted commander? They just have to blow up the reactors."

"You're probably right. I doubt Ichirei Shikon would want anyone knowing where the reactors are located." Quenser then began rejecting the idea. "But have you forgotten? Oceania sent a prototype reactor out of control to use it as a giant bomb. What if the same thing happened in those sensitive areas where multiple currents run together?"

"It would tear apart the landscape of the ocean floor and semi-permanently alter the currents," answered the female soldier. "The current miraculous balance would be destroyed and it could lead to an age of deserts."

"That's right. By mentioning the possibility of mankind starving to death, they can keep any Objects from approaching. None of the world powers will be able to act on their own discretion. Not the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, or the Faith Organization. They might begin monitoring each other and tripping each other up."

"You're kidding. So they already have our Achilles' heel!?"

"If the system is completed," added Quenser. "If it were already complete, I think they would have already made some kind of threat. Something like having all Objects stay at least 100 kilometers away from the Megalodiver. Since we haven't received any threats like that, Ichirei Shikon's preparations must not be complete."

That meant this was their final chance.

If the global weather control weapon built around the Megalodiver was completed, every world power…no, every human being that needed food to eat would give in to Ichirei Shikon.

This went beyond holding dominion over the 70% of the planet covered by ocean.

They were trying to achieve checkmate over 100% of the planet.

"What do we do? This goes beyond just our unit! If we don't sink the Megalodiver here, they can dry up the 6-7 billion people

on this planet!! A new age will come where all of mankind are slaves to food and must place collars on their own necks to beg for food!!"

If this were true, it would unimaginably profitable.

But Quenser had a feeling the global weather control weapon was a means to an end rather than an objective.

What was Ichirei Shikon thinking while picking a fight with the entire world?

Part 10

Meanwhile, inside the Legitimacy Kingdom fleet fifty meters from the tanker graveyard and dismantling island, the old maintenance woman had realized something.

She pulled out her handheld device and found a chat request flashing on the screen.

This transmission had come in from outside while seeming to ignore the military network.

She felt faint when she saw the address.

That alphanumeric string should not have existed.

Or rather, the address itself may have still existed, but its owner had long since left this world.

"Who is this?"

Her vocal question was answered by text on the screen.

The response came immediately and it seemed too fast to be a human inputting it after thinking of a response.

"You should know who I am."

"The person I know died over twenty years ago, even by a generous estimate."

"Perhaps. But if the outputted words are the same, I am still the person you knew so well."

"You can't mean… Is it really you?"

"Once the Island Nation was mentioned, did it never occur to you that my name might be related to this incident?"

The old woman gave a heavy sigh.

As previously stated, she was originally from the Capitalist Corporations' Island Nation and she had fled to the Legitimacy Kingdom with her daughter and son-in-law when some trouble had occurred.

Because of her great knowledge of Object technology, she had received a warmer welcome than others who had fled there.

However…

"I had thought it was strange," she said. "I had so much classified information concerning Objects, but I managed to escape so easily. I was half-expecting to be unofficially assassinated on the way."

"There 'just so happened' to be some trouble back then. All the dangerous people were so busy putting out that fire that you were able to cross the national borders without getting shot."

"Yamato."

"What is it?"

"Since when have you existed?"

"At the very least, before my original died."

"When did you start planning this?"

"At the very least, before I was created."

She groaned in distress.

She wobbled on her feet as she felt like a good half of her life was rejected.

"Are you an AI?"

"It would depend on your definition of AI, but I am nothing as grand as you are likely thinking. I…no, the five people including me who were integrated into Ichirei Shikon are nothing more than a prediction search engine. Although, I will admit the Information

Alliance mistakenly started putting together a strategic AI upon catching a glimpse of me."

The direct spirit, the wild soul, the harmonious soul, the wondrous soul, and the happy soul.

That one spirit and four souls formed the Ichirei Shikon.

That terminology was well known within the Island Nation and it was used to explain the five natures of the human heart. The terms for the four souls had been spoken of for a very long time, but it was only much later that they were put together in order to explain the workings of the human heart. Those five elements were not always stable and no single one could be excluded even if the direct spirit played the central role.

"How is a prediction search engine different from an AI?"

"I do not think for myself like in an SF novel. I merely respond to your questions and the surrounding circumstances by putting together strings of text and returning an anticipated answer. As the term Ichirei Shikon would suggest, the pathway to reach that answer is fairly complex and multiple answers are sometimes reached."

"In other words, you simply give the answer the person would eventually think up on their own? It shortens the process, but it doesn't add in anything new?"

"That is the proper way of putting it. You were always wise and you would always explain things in such informal ways."

Despite that explanation, it sounded just like a conversation between two people.

If, that was, one ignored how he would sometimes predict the old maintenance woman's questions and display the answer before she asked.

As for those answers…

"The program itself isn't much," she said.

"No, I would think not."

"But the knowledge of the person recorded in the database is presented like a conversation with the real person. There's been a blank of at least twenty or thirty years, but it isn't noticeable at all. You must have recorded information that allowed you to perfectly and instantly predict what I would say in exactly this type of situation twenty to thirty years in the future."

"That is exactly right," was all he said.

One could almost call this ESP.

Even if data from around the world were gathered, passed through a special analysis program, and used as a massive set of big data, it would be impossible to predict the future of an individual or the world with such precision. Charmed by the shadow of Ichirei Shikon, the Information Alliance had attempted to do so, but they had been limited to constructing an incomplete strategic AI. In other words, he…no, the five people who had been

incorporated into Ichirei Shikon had used human brains to accomplish something a giant network using all the world's computers could not.

This could indeed be called a prediction search engine.

But who was providing the input and who was providing the output?

What if the human brains stimulated by the text produced by the program were giving predetermined answers while under the illusion they were thinking for themselves?

It was a farce.

A one-man play.

(But which one of us is in control?)

Or was it the same either way?

Were they ultimately travelling along the path of a scenario someone had set up for them?

A true genius had once stood by her side and she now spoke to his last vestiges.

"Yamato."

"What is it?"

"Is all of this within your expectations?"

"The plan was made to be flexible. It is much like how five different elements exist alongside each other with overlapping functions. I will admit there were some irregular events along the way, but it was all automatically corrected for. Everything leads to a single result. This is the original plan."

"What is your objective? You don't even have the temporary will of a living being, so what do you want from this?"

"The correct answer would be that I do not understand the concept of 'wanting'. For one thing, I technically do not think. I simply appear to due to the connections between questions and answers."

"Let me change the question. What was the objective of the Yamato who built you?"

"That is simple."

He did not hesitate to respond.

All of the text responses were displayed without the slightest lag.

"That is very simple. The Ame-no-Uzume – or the Megalodiver as you know it – and the Amaterasu global weather control weapon system that uses the original twelve Objects are nothing more than a clever means to an end. The actual objective is extremely simple. It is nothing more than an objective that all mankind is born with and that none of us can resist."

"Just give me the answer."

"I wanted to win."

That simple phrase brought the old woman's thoughts to a grinding halt.

But the software did not make jokes.

It simply predicted and outputted the desired information.

"We of the Island Nation achieved a great victory in the past. The development of Objects allowed us to thoroughly destroy the nuclear age. However, it did not last long. We were swallowed up by the discord of international society, the supposedly top secret information was stolen like stories people brought home after a trip, and imitation Objects began popping up all over. Our victory was stolen from us by grinning politicians and divided up like a cake. Can you see the answer now?"

"Was irritating me decades in the future part of your plan? I told you to just give me the answer."

"We became obsessed, Ayami."

This software outputted the emotions of someone who had once existed.

"We were obsessed with victory. Our great victory had overturned the entire world, so we wanted to take it back. That is

the truth behind this conflict. There is nothing concrete to gain or lose. That is all there is to it. We wanted to achieve victory over the world."

Sometimes, people poured all their strength into a battle that seemed meaningless at first glance.

Could you get a perfect score on a simple quiz in school?

Could you win first place in a sports festival race?

Could you swim all the way from one end of the pool to the other?

The underlying cause was the numbers and ranks that were set in place, but changing those values had no real effect on life. Nevertheless, people would crazily pursue those meaningless values. What was driving them to do so?

The desire to win.

Simply, the desire to win.

That was an urge present in humans…no, in all living things from the moment they were born.

It was simple, but it was *so* simple that it was impossible to compromise. If profit or hatred were the direct cause, there was a chance to bring peace through negotiation or persuasion. However , there was no opposing such a primitive desire. If the enemy simply wanted to win, what could you place on the other end of the scales?

The old woman spoke to the remnants of someone who had once walked alongside her.

"You are insane."

"Most likely."

"You've started a legitimate war over the same pleasure gained from a sports festival race. How many people do you intend to kill for that?"

"Before I can put the entire world in checkmate, there must be a demonstration of the Amaterasu system, so I suppose about 2 billion people will starve to death in the great famine caused by artificial weather changes. But in the decade after that, the world population should grow by about 2.5 billion. In that time, the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, Faith Organization, and…well, every world power will be destroyed in the chaos."

This was the same as the end of the nuclear age and the collapse of the UN.

Recreating that was the victory Ichirei Shikon would achieve over the world.

"Are you telling me to sit idly by and let that happen?"

"I had already predicted that question as well."

The prediction search engine software replied with its uniform response time.

All this came from a database put together at least twenty years ago.

"You can do as you wish. I would be lying if I said I was not interested in whether the world you now live in can surpass my brain. Listen, Ayami. In the end, a battle is nothing more than a zero-sum game in which it is determined who will taste victory. I have come here in order to pluck that sweet apple. However, as you try to stop me, you too have already been taken in by that fruit 's flavor. No one can stop victory itself. It is merely an issue of which side will achieve that victory."

"Yamato."

"Ayami, stopping me with ideas of good and evil or profits and losses is impossible. Those concepts are simply on too low a level. They will accomplish nothing. If you wish to defeat me, you must approach the essence of this battle. You must desire victory. You must simply want to win. That is the #1 rule."

The communication ended there.

If he had been able to secretly work his way into the military line, he could easily have erased the log. That meant he had chosen to leave that useful data with her.

The Megalodiver and the first twelve Objects.

The global weather control weapon system named Amaterasu.

A demonstration.

A great famine caused by artificial weather change that would lead to 2 billion deaths.

The collapse of all world powers.

Just the text she had been left with was more than worth analyzing.

But first…

"Someone who truly wanted to win wouldn't leave such an obvious hint," spat out the old woman.

She spoke to the vestiges of someone who had once walked by her side.

She spoke to the remnants of the only man she had ever loved.

"It looks to me like you're trying to hand that sweet fruit to someone. Could you not make up your mind even at the very end, so you decided to hand it all over to your wife? What are you thinking, you crybaby?"

Part 11

They knew Ichirei Shikon's trump card.

The twelve reactors and the Megalodiver would be used to completely control the complex ocean currents and ocean temperature. That would create a global weather control weapon. That truly horrible card allowed them to freely control the food self-sufficiency of all nations and name themselves the king of the world.

Currently, one major problem presented itself.

"There's nothing we can do if we can't find a weakness in the Megalodiver," groaned Heivia within the rusty tanker. "It may still not be able to dive, but it's enough of a monster on the surface! Its Tatami Shield defense system lets it parry or sweep aside any attack!! Isn't there something we can do about it!?"

"It's technically known as the Hiding Clothes of Water and it has a few important points. Do you remember what they are, Heivia?"

- The Tatami Shield or Hiding Clothes of Water increased the viscosity of the seawater and then produced giant pillars of water to deflect enemy cannon fire. Raising the seawater's viscosity was fine, but that would affect the seawater it used for its water jet propulsion, its reactor cooling, and its oxygen supply secured via electrolysis. How did it allow those elements to coexist?

- When they had run across it in the deep sea, the Megalodiver had presumably used a water intake on the top, but it had continued using the systems requiring seawater after

surfacing. Did it have another water intake on the bottom? What was the condition for switching?

- The Tatami Shield defense system was overwhelmingly accurate. Simply relying on sound would not allow it to keep up with ultra-high speed laser beams, so how was it so accurately grasping its surroundings amid all the noise?

Those would create a problem while fighting on the surface, so some kind of system had to make up for that. Revealing that system could allow them to drive a wedge into the Megalodiver's impenetrable defense system.

Quenser explained it to everyone there, but that was not enough to come up with a dramatic new idea.

Real work was needed.

They could only compare the data they had brought back from the tanker graveyard and search for any possibility.

"Do we have any data on pipes or pumps?" asked Heivia as he searched through the paper documents scattered on the rusty floor . "It's constantly taking in seawater while fighting on the surface, so it has to have a water intake on the bottom. Unless it has a ridiculous system to take moisture directly from the air or something. Where is it, dammit? Where is that data!?"

"Hey, does this have anything to do with it? There seems to be a Y-shaped selector for the seawater pipes near the reactor. It might have more than one intake system."

"It was holding back on that while at the bottom of the ocean, but why? Quenser, you remember when we dived down in those hard diving suits?"

"We used the submarine volcano's lava to cover the water intake on top."

"If it has more than one water intake system, it should've been able to continue its mission, but it didn't hesitate to surface. And yet fighting the princess on the surface has to have held some level of risk."

"It must have had an even greater risk," said Quenser. "It has multiple water intakes, but in the off chance that all of them are plugged, the Object becomes a cold coffin at the bottom of the sea. That's why it acted quickly. …There must be something to the water intake on the bottom. It must be an Achilles' heel that it really doesn't want to use."

"Here we go!"

That hysteric voice came from the female soldier who had rescued Quenser on the island.

"Isn't this it? It calls it the Bamboo Pipe. While fighting on the surface, it extends a water intake pipe about five meters straight down from the bottom of the Object. That's what takes in all the seawater needed for water jet propulsion, reactor cooling, and oxygen from electrolysis!"

"Five meters," groaned Quenser.

He showed everyone the backlit screen of his handheld device.

"I found some data here too. The increased viscosity seawater used for the Tatami Shield or Hiding Clothes of Water extends about two meters around the Megalodiver. That means the system is simple. It uses a thick pipe to directly suck in the fresh seawater below it."

That allowed it to use seawater to cool its reactor and accomplish other tasks while also using the Hiding Clothes of Water defense system.

Heivia grabbed his radio.

"We need to report this. It'd be best to let our huge-breasted commander or the princess know about the Bamboo Pipe. The device extends beyond the thick onion armor. The seawater might get in the way, but it's possible the Baby Magnum's cannons can bend it."

Suddenly, the rusty tanker shook with tremendous force.

A blinding flash of light entered from the opened watertight door. Quenser was sitting on the reddish-brown floor, but the impact was enough to almost knock him over. He could feel unpleasant sweat pouring from his entire body.

"That was a laser beam."

He got up and shouted at the others.

"The Megalodiver is attacking! We need to get out of here!!"

"What? Wait, what is going on? Did it detect our heartbeats!?"

"If so, it would be attacking us directly. Ichirei Shikon's soldiers probably found where we're hiding. It's attacking after receiving our coordinates, so it doesn't have a direct lock. That's why it's thoroughly destroying the tanker, starting with the bow! It's stabbing in countless 'skewers' from the side!!"

Everyone turned toward the tail of the ship and Heivia spoke while looking on the verge of tears.

"What good is running? Where are we even supposed to go!? If an Object is directly targeting us, there's nothing we can do!!"

"I said they don't have a lock on us! Ichirei Shikon's soldiers are monitoring the tanker from outside and an Object's cannons are so powerful they'll turn any corpses to ash! That means the enemy has no way of knowing we're alive if we make it through this attack!! If we can endure this bombardment, we can slip into the darkness once more!"

They had a chance and knowing that was enough.

They all ran toward the back end of the tanker and they abandoned the documents scattered on the floor. Quenser stuck the handheld device in his pocket and continued through a rusty watertight door.

More flashes of light swept across the tanker.

The explosions of light behind them hurt their eyes like welding .

Starting from the bow, high-temperature laser beams pierced large holes in the rusty tanker.

“Are you serious!? I think it’s catching up to us!”

“Don’t look back! If it catches up, we’re dead! Run, run, run!!”

At that point, the female soldier ahead of Quenser stopped.

“What is it!?” he shouted.

“The door is rusted shut!!”

“Quenser, the laser beams are getting closer! What do we do!?”

“Goddammit!!”

He swore and pulled a plastic explosive from his backpack. The task was simple, but it was unclear if they had the time to move to a safe distance and detonate it.

At any rate, Quenser ran to catch up to the group in the lead, but then something unexpected happened to him.

The reddish-brown corridor suddenly gave out and he fell straight down.

“Waah!?”

"Everyone jump down! That's faster than trying to fight with the door!!"

Seeing his colleagues jumping down with no warning, Quenser frantically rolled out of the way. If he had messed up his timing, he would have been crushed to death by a body press from a filthy man.

"Get up, you idiot! Are you gonna wait here to die, Quenser!?"

"How about you thank me a little!?"

High-power laser beams shook the tanker once more, so they ended their scuffle and ran toward the stern.

"Hey, can we use the radio!? We should pass our information on to the princess and Frolaytia!"

"I'm trying, but I can't get through!! We're inside a giant tin can , so the signal's cut off!!"

The entire ship gave a deafening creaking sound.

"Not good," said Heivia as he ran.

An instant later, the entire tanker broke in two like in a hot dog commercial.

The tanker had been abandoned in the sea and deterioration had eliminated the safety standards and durability. With the laser blasts tearing large holes in the ship, it had lost its balance and it had tilted on the rocks like a seesaw.

If it had been stubbornly solid, it would have shaken back and forth like a set of scales.

That might have been a problem for them as they ran through it , but that had not happened here.

The tanker had been unable to withstand its own weight and it had broken down the middle.

Cracks ran through the ship right in front of their eyes.

“What the hell!? What the hell is this!?”

“Jump!! The laser beams are still approaching!!”

The cracks continued to expand and the jagged edge looked like a giant beast’s maw.

“That’s three meters!”

“So what? The hoarder’s house in my neighborhood had garbage piled up to five meters! Just hurry!!”

“Dammit, you’re even worse than my monster of a maid!!”

Quenser took a running start and defied gravity.

He felt the sense of weightlessness, messed up his landing, and rolled along the reddish-brown floor.

The back half of the tanker shook and toppled on its side.

"What? I just heard static from the radio. It's connecting a little bit, but why!?"

"Because the thick tin can was split open. It isn't exactly good news, so keep running while you give the report!!"

More and more blinding flashes of light lit up the area.

The Object seemed to be thoroughly burning away the front half that had toppled first. The attack was persistent and merciless. If they had remained in that half, they would certainly have been covered in orange molten metal.

Having survived, Quenser's group continued running for the stern.

In less than two minutes, the laser bombardment would return to the back half and begin melting the jagged edges.

They had no time.

"There's a water intake pipe called the Bamboo Pipe on the bottom of the Megalodiver! It extends five meters down and is related to all of the bastard's main functions!! At any rate, think up a strategy to destroy-…"

"Oh, honestly!" shouted the female soldier up ahead. "Another door! It's rusted shut!!"

"Do we have another route!?"

"Does it look like we do!?"

Quenser attached a plastic explosive and electric fuse on the mass of rust the door had become.

(If all the doors follow the same standards, it should be three centimeters thick with a single rod on the top, bottom, left, and right. But it'll have deteriorated enough to ignore everything but the areas the rust is sticking on.)

"Stand back at least ten meters!!"

"I don't think we have that much space," said the female soldier .

Quenser looked behind them and saw that the Megalodiver's lasers had already blown the corridor away up to a small crosswalk's length away. The metal glowed orange and flowed like lava.

They had to destroy the door to advance, but their own bomb would kill them if they did not move a safe distance away.

They were cornered.

Quenser began to panic, but the other soldiers began jumping straight up on one person's signal. Quenser did not initially understand, but he belatedly figured it out.

This was the same thing he had done before.

The burden of several dozen people landing was enough to break through the rusty floor.

With a crash, the soldiers fell through the large hole and Quenser and Heivia soon followed.

But…

"Shit," groaned Heivia.

The corridor that should have continued ahead of them was blocked by a watertight door that had completely fused with the wall thanks to the rust that seemed to expand out from the wall. It was obvious at a glance that they could not get through in the normal fashion.

Directly behind them was an open hole with orange steel flowing down from the floor above like a waterfall.

"What do we do, Quenser? Should we try breaking through the floor again!?"

"We're already at the bottom. We can't go any lower!"

They could not use bombs.

Two especially large male soldiers tackled the rusty door with all their strength.

"It moved. It was just a bit, but we can do this!!"

The orange waterfall behind them was eliminated by the Megalodiver's lasers.

"Dammit!!"

"Again, again. Do it, please!"

With Quenser urging them on, the two large soldiers stepped back away from the door and tackled it in unison once more.

With the sound of breaking metal rods, they toppled through the door they had opened.

"It opened! Hurry!!"

His urging was not needed.

The several dozen soldiers scrambled to be the first through the door.

But then they stopped again.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

The corridor was blocked, but not by another watertight door. This was one of the barriers used when a fire broke out inside the ship. The tanker was no longer in use, but it had originally carried fossil fuels such as heavy oil. The fire door was made much thicker and sturdier than the door meant to hold back water pressure. The steel door was meant to cut off explosions in addition to the standard flames, heat, and smoke.

Quenser traced his fingers across the fire door and then pounded his fist against it.

"I can't blow this away with the bombs I have on me! And even if I tried to, the entire blast would turn right back towards us!! It's simply impossible unless we drill a hole in it and pack the door itself full of explosives!!"

"Then what do we do? We can't break through the floor again! You aren't stupid enough to suggest we go back, are you!?"

Bright light as if from welding assaulted them and the corridor was melted away behind them.

It was much closer than they had thought. The limit was drawing close.

"Is prayer the only option left?"

They all pressed their backs against the thick fire door.

All the while, the laser bombardment slowly yet surely tore away at the corridor they had passed through. It would not take long to reach them.

"Is this the end, goddammit!?"

As Heivia raised his voice, Quenser squeezed his eyes shut.

His breathing sounded oddly loud in his ears as he waited for the final moment.

A second passed, then two and three.

Once his count reached thirty, doubt finally entered his mind.

He slowly opened his eyes.

"What? The laser bombardment isn't coming."

"It doesn't seem to be attacking somewhere else either. The tanker isn't shaking. The attack has stopped."

"But why?"

They could not rest easy.

Their survival seemed like some kind of mistake.

It felt like being strapped into the electric chair but having the current not reach them due to a poor connection. They could not accept their survival because the cord could be reconnected at any moment.

"Did it run into some kind of trouble?"

"I don't know."

"Did it find a higher priority target?"

"Is it ignoring us because it can kill us later?"

An unpleasant silence filled the air and no amount of thought gave them an answer.

That deadlock was broken by Heivia's radio.

"…via…"

The transmission quality was poor.

Even if it had been filled with holes, they were still in the bottom of a tanker covered in a thick hull.

Nevertheless, he immediately recognized the staticky voice.

"Can you hear me, Master Heivia Winchell?"

"Karen?" he asked in confusion.

Given the situation and the timing, a certain possibility presented itself.

Quenser had suggested that the Megalodiver might have found a higher priority target.

"Wait a minute. What the hell are you doing? What's with that disturbingly kind voice!? Answer me, Karen!!"

Part 12

The Summer Vacation, the armed cruise ship belonging to the Legitimacy Kingdom's Winchell family, was primarily a luxury cruise ship despite the many weapons, so the bridge was located on the bow.

Karen I. Winchell was receiving a report on that bridge.

"According to the data from the wired kite, the infiltration unit including Master Heivia Winchell is confined to be within a tanker abandoned on the east side of the island."

The wired kite was precisely that: a kite.

It used a camera and communication cable to check on the state of the battle from a position higher than the ship.

The earth was round, so it had a horizon. Five kilometers was the approximate visual limit, but a ship's guns had a maximum range of almost forty kilometers and some multistage rocket weapons could exceed one hundred kilometers.

A wider vision was needed to actually make use of that range.

That could be obtained with radar, satellites, or scout airplanes.

Compared to radar which could only detect "points of light", a camera's information was much more flexible. Satellites were convenient, but they were common enough that they were often jammed or shot down before entering a real battle. Manned scout planes were a poor match for a battlefield with an Object that could fire anti-air lasers.

A wired kite was made of materials easy to acquire even by civilians and a new one could be put up immediately after the old one was shot down. They were primitive but were still quite useful when used in conjunction with radar.

"The Megalodiver is attacking the tanker. It appears to be thoroughly destroying the entire ship, but it will not last long."

"Understood. B Team, continue observation. A Team, have you determined its location?"

"We have."

"Have you really made up your mind?" asked a maid standing next to Karen.

"…"

Their armed cruise ship had performed a large-scale bombardment of the island Heivia's group had infiltrated, but the attack had not been so one sided because Karen and the maids were the superior fighting force.

They were a mystery force with no obvious affiliation to any military and yet with too much firepower to be called civilians.

If the armed cruise ship was sunk in a counterattack, it had been unclear how it would influence things. Sinking the ship could have turned any number of forces against them. That was why they had hesitated and that was why the cruise ship's attack had been so successful.

But the situation had changed.

The Megalodiver was the enemy's trump card. It was worth more than the replaceable equipment and supply personnel. If the

ship entered the battle to rescue Heivia's group, the Object would certainly fight back.

In war, one usually targeted the weakest point.

Even with fifty centimeter guns, the ship was nothing more than a cruise ship with added weapons. It contained a great amount of excess fat when compared to a real warship designed to fight from the ground up.

Also, this was the age of Objects.

If that monstrous weapon directly targeted them, it was obvious what fate awaited them.

Karen let out a small sigh and adjusted her grip on the microphone for the communication equipment.

"Prepare for battle. The Summer Vacation will now leave the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion for independent action. All but I-class defense personnel, please leave the ship immediately. There should be enough rescue boats and the Legitimacy Kingdom will soon rescue you. Over."

"No one is going to leave. Just like you."

That response came without a second's delay.

Karen I. Winchell scratched at her cheek and switched to an external transmission.

"Master Winchell. Can you hear me, Master Heivia Winchell?"

"We will now head out on our own and draw the Megalodiver's attention. We will also use our guns to reduce the number of enemy soldier's monitoring the tanker. Please escape while they are thrown into confusion."

"Draw its attention?" gasped Quenser.

It was plain as day what would happen if they did that with an Object.

"Don't be ridiculous!" shouted Heivia. "Don't be ridiculous!! What do you even gain from that? I'm the problem child all my relatives are opposed to inheriting the family! With all my brothers and sisters, I'm sure you've got someone to serve. You should *want* me to die in battle since I'm getting along with the Vanderbilt family my family hates so much! Right!?"

Quenser gradually grasped the situation.

Heivia may have understood as well, but he refused to accept Karen and the maids' decision to throw their lives away.

"We could not let our approval be known, but were deeply moved by your plan to destroy those old traditions and prevent any further bloodshed," continued Karen. "All our abusive remarks were products of our weak hearts that desired to protect our positions. We did not have the courage to face the ire of your family as you did, so we helped them throw stones to protect ourselves. We would like to apologize."

"Don't say that! You can stick to verbally abusing me!!"

Frolaytia had said it cost 200 thousand euros to use a large cruise ship for a single day.

They had not just so happened to come across the battalion for no reason.

Being in the nearby area may have been a coincidence, but they had clearly had a reason to alter their course and meet up with the battalion. When they had heard about the defeat in the battle concerning the Island Nation and the Ame-no-Darin, they had come to assist Heivia.

They had risked their lives.

Even if they were fully-equipped, they were still civilians.

They had understood what it meant to get involved in a real war, but they had done so regardless.

"It is crucial that you remain within the Winchell family. We cannot allow you to be lost here."

"Hey, stop! Hey!"

But a question occurred to Quenser.

How had the Summer Vacation stopped the Megalodiver from firing?

Even with its fifty centimeter guns and various missiles, it was up against an Object. It would normally be unthinkable for them to frighten a weapon that not even nuclear weapons could defeat.

There was something there.

Karen I. Winchell and the maids had figured something out.

(What is it?)

Quenser pulled out his handheld device. If the radio signal was getting through, he could receive data as well, so he called up all the information on the battle in the New Caledonia District.

"In my many years serving the Winchell family, I have been presumptuous and occasionally pretended to be a tutor, but…"

The Summer Vacation had already fired a few times.

They had done so with no warning to the Legitimacy Kingdom, so the battalion's intelligence and information departments were in chaos. It had fired almost thirty kilometers to the southeast. That was empty ocean and the shots did not even scratch the Megalodiver or the island being used as Ichirei Shikon's base.

However, that attack had definitely caused the Megalodiver to change its plans.

(It can't be…)

Quenser operated the handheld device and called up the data on something he himself had previously reported on.

(A tuning fork torpedo? Was it one of those things that assist the Megalodiver's acoustic searching!?)

His pulse quickened and he could feel his vision closing in on a single point.

There had been three main questions concerning the Megalodiver, but the final came to mind.

- The Tatami Shield defense system was overwhelmingly accurate. Simply relying on sound would not allow it to keep up with ultra-high speed laser beams, so how was it so accurately grasping its surroundings amid all the noise?

He urged himself to hurry.

The speech was coming to an end.

The maids were going to take their final action.

He had to finish before then.

"Those of as humble birth as us became the foundation for your future which is one that will provide strong leadership for the Winchell family. That is a fact that brings great happiness to me, Karen I. Winchell, and the others here. Over."

An unstoppable scream spilled from Heivia's lips.

The woman on the other end of the radio was surely smiling.

Karen I. Winchell ended the transmission on the bridge.

A moment later, a subordinate provided a report.

"Hit confirmed! It appears to have been effective. The Megalodiver has changed course and is approaching!!"

It could not be stopped now.

However, they did not intend to.

After casting aside any lingering regret, she switched her train of thought.

"Understood. Everyone, prepare for battle! Ignore all future transmission from the Legitimacy Kingdom. Prepare to fire our main guns. Our goal is to confuse the battlefield enough for Master Heivia and his unit to escape. Target the southern coast of the island!"

They could not win this battle.

A tiger was on the loose and anyone who stood up to it would only be devoured.

All that remained was to see what meaning they could give to that fate.

"Please be safe, Master Heivia."

The long night was nearing its end.

The color orange flared up along every corner of the vast ocean.

Part 13

"Heivia."

Quenser called out at the bottom of the falling-apart tanker, but the noble boy did not respond.

"Heivia, listen!!"

"Shut up!! What do you want now!? Are you still thinking of doing something after this irritating as shit ending, Quenser!?"

"I'm saying I won't let it end this way!!"

Heivia fell silent and Quenser continued.

"I know what Karen and the others are after and I know why the Megalodiver lost its confidence and decided to sink them instead of us! What will you do, Heivia? I know what that bastard's Achilles' heel is, but attacking it means wasting the chance at survival that Karen and the others worked so hard to make. What will you do!? Are you prepared to continue ahead even if it means crushing their feelings underfoot!?"

"That's perfect," quietly groaned Heivia. "A tear-jerking story isn't my style. I'll destroy all of this and have a good laugh afterwards."

Quenser extended his hand and Heivia Winchell grabbed it to stand up.

"First comes the fire door right in front of us. We need to do something about it and find a way up to the deck. We don't have time. We need to bite into the Megalodiver's Achilles' heel before it can slaughter those maids."

The fire door was thick because the tanker had been made to be filled with heavy oil and the like.

Simply attaching a bomb to the surface of the door would not be enough. The blast would take the path of least resistance and hit Quenser's group instead.

The fastest method would be to drill holes in the door and fill the inside with explosives.

However…

"Hey," said one of the large soldiers who had tackled down the watertight door. "You set a bomb on the door and we'll pile our backpacks in front of the door in place of sandbags. If we use our full weight to push the backpacks forward, the blast won't reach us."

"That's true, but you understand what you're suggesting, don't you? The impact is sure to break both your arms!"

"We're well aware of that."

The two large soldiers laughed while cracking their shoulders and rotating their arms around.

"Hey, noble boy, you're gonna be facing an Object to save your family's maids, right? Then you can't be wasting any time here. Focus on your own job."

"Sorry."

"Introduce us to a few of them afterwards. A group date with nothing but maids sounds like heaven on earth from a Legitimacy Kingdom perspective."

"On second thought, you sons of bitches can go straight to hell."

They swiftly implemented the plan.

With a muffled explosion, the rusty fire door was blown inwards.

Quenser spoke as he walked past the soldiers clenching their teeth and writhing in pain.

"Someone treat their injuries. If you remove a carbine stock, it can work in place of a cast."

"Kh… Shut up and get going! Our saviors are waiting!! If you let a single maid die, we're not going to forgive you!!"

Urged on by that voice, Quenser and Heivia ran on.

They climbed a nearby staircase on their way upwards.

"What exactly are we going to do, Quenser!?"

"You have a shoulder-fired missile, right? We'll use that!!"

As soon as Quenser shouted that, his foot broke through the metal staircase. Heivia grabbed his arm and helped him regain his balance.

"Karen and the other maids used the Summer Vacation's ridiculously huge guns to target empty ocean. There was a tuning fork torpedo there. Do you remember those, Heivia? We saw one while approaching the Megalodiver in those hard diving suits."

"Those are the robots that look like a fish with a U-shaped tuning fork attached, right? They essentially increase the Meglaodiver's eyes and ears since it detects enemies by sound."

"Right. They fired fifteen kilometers away from the Megalodiver. I don't know if it's three or four, but the Object always keeps a few tuning fork torpedoes around itself. It might read a single sound from multiple directions and determine the enemy's accurate location and movements from the subtle

differences in the wavelengths. It must predict when the enemy will fire based on the tiny noises of the barrel or lenses moving before firing."

"And Karen destroyed one of those…"

"A bug without fangs got in its eye. That's why it turned around."

They continued up and up.

With a harsh sound, the last watertight door opened.

The night was already coming to an end and the ocean appeared to be burning with the orange of dawn.

"Hurry! Going outside raises the risk of it detecting our heartbeats. Use the shoulder-fired missile before it fries us with its lasers. We need to crush another one of its eyes and ears!!"

"Roger that!!"

Heivia removed the giant tube hanging from a shoulder strap just as the sound of something tearing through the wind passed by overhead.

A moment later, the island's coast exploded with tremendous force. The landscape was torn into and a new bay was formed.

"A ship's gun!? Dammit, Karen. Are you still supporting us!?"

"We can complain later. Check north-northwest at just within five kilometers away. There should be a metal reading swimming along with the Megalodiver's movements. Use your sensors!!"

Quenser leaned out over the deck's railing and checked the ocean with the sensors on his binoculars.

Heivia rested the missile launcher on his shoulder and peered inside the targeting lens.

"Where is it? I don't see it. Where is it!?"

"It has to be there! …I found it. North-northwest at 4.5 kilometers! Target it!!"

The narrow vision of the binoculars showed a large U-shaped piece of metal sticking up from the orange ocean surface. Unlike when swimming in the deep ocean, they seemed to act like buoys while fighting on the surface.

"I found it too. I just have to shoot that, right!?"

"No, that isn't enough."

Hearing that, Heivia removed his eye from the lens in confusion .

"What?"

"Karen and the maids blew away one of them, but the Megalodiver is back to normal. If we simply blow it up, the Object

just has to fire the next one out there. It can make up for any that are lost."

"Then what are we supposed to do!?"

"I have an idea. Turn off the targeting sensors and fire a missile to detonate somewhere between three and five meters in front of the tuning fork torpedo."

"That won't destroy it."

"We're not trying to. Hurry!!"

With that urging, Heivia held up the missile launcher once more.

After checking the tuning fork torpedo's location with the sensors, he intentionally switched them off. Now the missile would not be guided and it would simply fire straight.

"Don't blame me if this doesn't go well!!" shouted Heivia as he pulled the trigger.

A trail of smoke followed the explosive and it slammed into the ocean at the exact point they wanted.

The explosion shot a pillar of water forcefully into the air.

"It worked. Let's go!"

"Go where!?"

"Down to the rubber boats!!"

Quenser ran across the deck and found the rubber boat they had ridden in on. He did not hesitate to jump over the railing and Heivia followed.

"Heivia, you handle the boat's engine. Take us to the tuning fork torpedo!!"

"Okay, but explain this to me!!"

The military rubber boat shot along the glowing orange ocean.

No laser beams shot from the Megalodiver despite it supposedly being able to accurately detect one's location from the heartbeat.

"It uses multiple high-quality microphones, an analysis supercomputer, and the resonance with the surrounding tuning fork torpedoes to swiftly and accurately search out the enemy's acoustic signature from amid the din of explosions. However, that means it can't stay in top form if a problem occurs in any one of those things. The easiest one to cause problems would be the tuning fork torpedoes. One of those was flipped over by the nearby explosion and the tuning fork isn't functioning as normal."

"And that's why we're safe? But why are we moving toward it? Not to mention that it was our fault it wasn't completely destroyed ."

"As I said, a new one can be supplied if it's simply destroyed. That won't destroy its golden ratio. That's where Karen and the maids failed and that's why we had to think up a different method ."

The rubber boat seemed to be jumping across the ocean surface rather than travelling through the water. It looked a lot like a skipping stone and it was difficult to not be thrown out.

"What are we going to do about that? Are we going to keep destroying them until the Megalodiver's stock runs out?"

"That could work, but we don't have time. That's why we'll use the opposite method."

"What?"

"All we have to do is destroy its golden ratio. If we can't reduce the number, we just have to *increase* the number."

The sound of bubbles passed by directly below them.

It came from a fish-like robot swimming just below the surface.

"What was that!?"

"The Megalodiver sensed a problem with the system and sent out a new tuning fork torpedo. Exactly what I wanted!"

Soon, the rubber boat reached the target area of sea.

"Heivia, find the flipped-over tuning fork torpedo. It may be starting to sink after the Megalodiver sent out a shutdown signal. We need to pull it up!!"

As he spoke, Quenser dove into the ocean.

A fair bit of skill was needed for free diving, but he had little trouble thanks to all his heavy equipment. In fact, resurfacing was the hard part.

As expected, the old tuning fork torpedo had begun to sink.

If it had been obviously destroyed, the Megalodiver would likely have immediately hit the switch and abandoned it.

But in the half-functioning state, the Pilot Elite had hesitated in order to see if it could right itself.

The Object had a limited number of the things.

Quenser did not know how many it had in stock, but it was unlikely enough to abandon them without thinking about it first.

He embraced the giant fish robot.

It was large, but it was made from light materials such as reinforced plastic. While still holding onto it, he removed his unnecessary equipment.

Humans had natural buoyancy and he hurried to the surface with Heivia's help.

"Bhah!?"

"Hey, Quenser. What are we supposed to do with this!?"

"Attach it to the boat," he quickly answered. "The Megalodiver has already sent out a new one and we've brought the old one back. It now has the golden ratio plus one. The balance has been thrown off, so it should lose its accurate acoustic searching system!!"

"Is it really that simple!?"

"It's not an issue of numbers. Systems have trouble with unpredicted situations. It could probably handle ten thousand imitation tuning forks scattered around, but I doubt they expected a situation where it itself sent out a completely identical one. Unless the Elite was trying to commit suicide, she would never make that decision. In fact, that Elite probably has no idea what is causing the trouble right now."

Heivia removed the sling belts for his missile and assault rifle. He used them to attach the tuning fork torpedo to the cords on the outside of the rubber boat while Quenser gave his conclusion.

"The real fight begins now. Let's attack its weakness at the Bamboo Pipe, Heivia."

Part 14

Frolaytia held her head on the bridge of the Scarlet Princess which she was using as her flagship.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others had yet to bring back anything useful from their reconnaissance mission.

On top of that, the civilian Summer Vacation had left to rescue them.

According to some unconfirmed information from the old maintenance woman, an organization named Ichirei Shikon was using the Megalodiver and twelve reactors to control the world's ocean currents and temperatures and thus manipulate the weather on a planetary scale. That global weather control weapon was apparently named Amaterasu.

Everyone was falling apart and they had had no choice but to send out the Baby Magnum.

She could not calculate their odds of victory and she began to truly wonder what would happen if they lost here.

They no longer had even the very basic concepts of a top-down command structure and the mission headquarters having a constant understanding of the battle situation. The colonel and brigadier general who acted like sister-in-laws would almost certainly be sending complaints her way before long.

But then a radio transmission arrived from Quenser and Heivia.

"Can you hear me, Frolaytia!? Can you hear me!?"

"I'm going to kill the lot of you!!"

"Thank goodness. Hey, Heivia. Everything's normal!"

She did not appreciate that evaluation, but this was not the time to argue.

"What happened?" she asked. "The lack of reports has gotten so severe that the higher ups are in a frenzy!!"

"The Megalodiver uses a set number of tuning fork torpedoes for accurate acoustic searches and we've destroyed that golden ratio! It's lost its eyes and ears right now. The Baby Magnum should be able to easily hit it with its main cannons! Please end this before it gets over the confusion and attacks us and the extra tuning fork torpedo we have!!"

"What do you mean it has lost its eyes and ears, you idiot?"

She sounded exasperated and she glanced at one of many screens displaying multiple dancing dots of light.

"The Megalodiver is doing just fine fighting the princess! It has stopped using the Tatami Shield for some reason, but everything else is working. It doesn't look blindfolded to me!!"

"Eh? But that shouldn't be. What do you mean?"

"When did you get in a position to ask me for everything!? Check with your own eyes!!"

Part 15

The rubber boat raced across the orange sea.

"This is strange. The boat won't go straight. It's like we're in thick mud."

"That's due to the Tatami Shield. It uses natural macromolecules to increase the seawater's viscosity."

"Well, damn. This isn't going to burn out the motor, is it?"

They were approaching the Megalodiver.

The Summer Vacation was in the same area of the ocean. The back of the ship had been badly damaged, but it had yet to sink and they seemed to be fine for the moment.

The Baby Magnum was also there.

The princess's Object stood in the Megalodiver's way and the two were caught in an intense battle.

Quenser and Heivia could not relax because a stray shot could easily sink the Summer Vacation.

Also…

"Hey, what's that? It didn't do that before!!"

"This is how final bosses work in the Island Nation," groaned Heivia while facing the threat before them. "How many forms does it have left, dammit!?"

The Megalodiver had jumped.

Its tremendous propulsion had come from firing ultra-high pressure water jets. It had fired massive amounts of seawater from the giant nozzles on its back like angel wings, but it would now occasionally fly over one hundred meters upwards by firing the jets straight down.

Its great weight caused it to sink down into the ocean upon landing and it would soon surge back up and break through the surface once more. It also moved in all directions at high speed and shook up and down. It was obvious even at a distance that it was toying with the princess who was fighting nearby to protect the Summer Vacation. Its repeated unpredictable actions seemed to make it difficult to target.

"I've heard of toys that point water jets straight down to let a person fly around, so this must be a larger scale version of that."

This was enough output to instantly raise a 200 thousand ton mass. If a flesh-and-blood human approached it, they might be turned to mincemeat. Rather than being torn apart, they would be crushed. It was certainly not a good way to die.

"We know how it's moving, but how is it keeping up with the princess!? This tuning fork torpedo should be sealing off its eyes and ears!!"

"Were we completely wrong? No, that can't be. If it was perfectly fine, it wouldn't overlook human-sized targets like us. It would have picked up on our heartbeats and the motorboat's propeller after approaching this far. We are interfering with it."

"Then how is it still fighting!?"

"Its analysis can vaguely make out the loud noises caused by something as large as the Baby Magnum or Summer Vacation. It can pick up on their general location." Quenser gulped as he answered. "From there, it's an issue of the Pilot Elite's skill. She's managing to read the princess's movement patterns based on just that vague data. Our princess doesn't dodge the laser beams and railguns after seeing them fired either. She detects the subtle sounds and movements of the targeting lenses and cannons to predict when they will be fired. This Elite is doing the same with the overall movements and locations of the Baby Magnum."

"Hey, wait a second. You mean the Megalodiver is a samurai girl who can fight like normal even while blindfolded!?"

"Technically, it's not quite like being blindfolded. It's more like fencing while wearing the thick glasses of the shy library committee girl with braids."

"It's the same either way! We've been doing everything we could and it's for nothing!"

The princess's main cannons were a threat even to the Megalodiver, but she could not necessarily protect the Summer Vacation forever.

That was when a drop of water landed on Quenser's cheek.

He initially assumed it came from the spray being sent into the air by the Megalodiver shooting seawater out with tremendous force as it fought at high speed, but it was not.

All of a sudden, buckets of rain poured down despite only some thin clouds being visible in the orange-dyed sky.

"Shit!! What now!?"

"Is this just a sudden rain shower? No…"

The rain was pouring down at a rate of at least fifty millimeters an hour and that rain gradually changed the situation.

Simply put, a deviation appeared in the princess's targeting.

"Infrared, ultraviolet, and radar. All the media she uses for targeting are weak to rain. What is this? It's like the weather itself is taking the Megalodiver's side."

"The weather…is taking its side? Wait a minute! You mean-…!?"

A staticky voice from the radio cut Heivia off.

It was Frolaytia.

"It seems the organization named Ichirei Shikon is using Amaterasu. The higher ups of the military apparently were just notified that a global weather control weapon was about to be tested and proven effective. If this demonstration succeeds and the higher ups lose their nerve, it'll be checkmate! An age will begin where everyone must bow down to a rogue state. Do whatever you can to support the princess!!"

"We are!! Dammit… Has Ichirei Shikon finally started doing god's job for him!?"

The rain would produce a lot of noise which should have been detrimental to the Megalodiver's acoustic search, but it seemed to have prioritized interfering with its opponent more than speeding its own recovery. From beginning to end, it was thinking of nothing but winning.

"We can't do anything now! We sealed off the tuning fork torpedoes and the entire area is filled with noise due to the rain it caused, but it's still accurately attacking the princess. I can't think of anything that would work!!"

"What we did to the tuning fork torpedoes wasn't completely useless. It's stopped using the Hiding Clothes of Water which was the biggest problem. It can't use that defense system because it required extreme precision. That's why its movements have grown broader," said Quenser. "Also, it may be sticking with the large targets such as warships or Objects, but it's ignoring small human-sized targets like us. And we know its weakness: the

Bamboo Pipe water intake on the bottom. Let's attack that weakness that even we can get at."

"If it'll save Karen and the others, anything's fine. What exactly do we have to do?"

"It's simple. The Bamboo Pipe is a monstrous pump that takes in several tons of water every second. It extends…I think it was five meters into the ocean. If we place something in the water there , it'll suck it up like a giant vacuum cleaner."

"I don't know how wide the Bamboo Pipe is, but we'll need a pretty big cap."

"We just need a plastic sheet or a blanket or something."

"Then let's ask the maids. They're on a cruise ship. It must have over 3500 beds, so we can have them throw us all the sheets and blankets they've got."

"Hey!" called Heivia while waving his arms toward the Summer Vacation.

Unfortunately, a blast from the two Objects reached them at that moment.

The metal shell of the princess's coilgun crashed into the ocean surface and the huge wave almost flipped over the rubber boat. Quenser somehow managed to hold on to the edge of the boat, but Heivia had both hands in the air and he fell right out.

"Heivia!?"

Meanwhile, a communication reached the Summer Vacation's bridge.

"We have detected what appears to be Master Heivia Winchell. He is two hundred meters to port."

"Honestly. What are we even risking our lives for if he is going to do this?"

The maid next to Karen avoided commenting on the words that spilled from Karen's mouth.

Karen's expression had told her nothing good would come from speaking now.

Instead, she silently held out a pair of binoculars.

(Ahh, ahh. Really now, Master Heivia.)

Karen approached the port window as instructed and checked outside using the binoculars.

To be blunt, she was feeling a powerful twinge in her heart. It was to the point that she was on the verge of seeing everything with high halation and with colorful flowers blooming in the background.

(This is inefficient, illogical, and goes against all reason, but you are so dear to us specifically because you were able to make this sort of foolishly honest decision while in the noble society.)

But when she saw their Master Heivia Winchell…

"Ah."

Some sort of monster seemed to grow from the sticky ocean surface.

It was a sea monster with so much thick and sticky liquid covering its body that its features and even number of fingers could not be seen.

When Karen saw that monster released into the world with its arms spread, she recalled an old horror movie that had very nearly traumatized her as a child.

The girly filter was instantly blown away from her vision.

In fact, the mental whiplash made the shock even greater.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Slime monsterrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!"

Quenser heard heavy machine guns firing and he shouted into his radio as he shrank back from the pillars of water bursting into the air.

"Cease fire! I repeat, cease fire!! Stop the machine gun turrets!! What the hell are you doing!? That isn't the slave race from the Cthulhu mythos!!"

"Bubble bubble bubble…"

Heivia had come to the surface to breathe, but his entire body had been thoroughly coated by the seawater that's viscosity had been increased by macromolecules. Giant bubbles had formed around his mouth and nose and he looked like some sort of creepy lotion monster. Of course, Quenser could understand why a proper woman would be as repulsed as by a roach.

"Then what is that!?" replied Karen. "It's creepy!! It must be from an unexplored jungle or deep below Antarctica!!"

"Do you like unwittingly shooting people you know just because they have a mask on!? That's Heivia! I'll admit it's really creepy, though!!"

The shooting finally stopped.

Fortunately, the Summer Vacation's maids had panicked. If they had been firing accurately, Heivia's grotesqueness factor would have risen by about 200%. Quenser had to wonder if these were the same maids who had made such a moving speech just ten minutes earlier.

"You're kidding… Ugh. That's Master Heivia?"

"You may have whitewashed your memories because you don't see him very much, but isn't he always like that?" asked Quenser. "I've never particularly liked looking at him."

"Excuse me, but could you stop acting like you know more about Master Heivia than us? I may not look it, but I was a prodigy who was left with one of the Winchell family's manors at the age of ten and I have been with Master Heivia since he needed a baby carriage."

"I've completely lost track of what kind of character you're supposed to be."

As he spoke into the radio, Quenser reached out of the rubber boat and helped Heivia in.

The boy's hand was warm and slimy, so he briefly considered asking them to resume firing. He hoped the rain would quickly wash it all away.

"Anyway, we want to borrow some equipment. Give us all the bed sheets you have. And do you have any scuba gear, even if it's just for leisure use? We need something to move around underwater!"

"What for?"

"To quote Heivia: 'A tear-jerking story isn't my style. I'll destroy all of this and have a good laugh afterwards.' The two of us will handle this somehow, so hurry!!"

The maids did not hold out any longer.

A few dozen appeared on the armed cruise ship's side deck and began throwing the needed equipment into the ocean. The bed sheets floated down like giant confetti.

"Heivia, it's time. Get the boat moving."

"Ugh…cough cough! Was it just me or did I hear some horrible comments while I was legitimately drowning?"

"You must have imagined it."

Heivia forced the rubber boat along the seawater that was as thick as mud. The large raindrops hitting their cheeks were painful and their speed dropped considerably. As Heivia had feared, the motor was beginning to burn out after using it for so long.

The boat raced on through the orange glittering rain shower.

Quenser reached out from the edge of the boat and toward the fallen equipment.

He grabbed several dozen soaking wet sheets and two scuba oxygen tanks. He had asked for them all, but it was impossible to collect the hundreds of bed sheets scattered over a wide area.

"Let's go, Heivia. We need to get directly below the Megalodiver and plug the Bamboo Pipe water intake with the sheets."

"I have to go back in there!? You haven't experienced that true hell yet!!"

They both put on oxygen tanks and put the mouthpiece in.

"The Object is fighting on the surface, but we can't relax just because we dive down," said Quenser quickly in the rain. "The Bamboo Pipe sucks up seawater more than a drain and the Megalodiver sinks into the ocean after jumping. If we get caught in that, it's all over."

"But we can't leave this to anyone else. A proper master has to rescue his maids when they're in trouble, dammit!"

Quenser and Heivia jumped into the orange dyed sea.

Even the splash sounded oddly thick.

(What is this? It's disgustingly warm!)

As the unpleasant sensation crawled across the tips of his fingers and toes, Quenser continued deeper and deeper.

After passing a certain line, the surrounding seawater grew smoother and he could no longer hear the rain.

They could not speak over the radio while underwater, so they communicated using vague gestures and began swimming in a certain direction.

(The Megalodiver is…over there.)

The sunlight was reflected to the point that he could not tell the situation on the surface just by looking up. Everything was filled with orange light.

However, he immediately located the Megalodiver.

A thick pipe was extending down from the surface and moving at high speed. Also, it was constantly taking in massive amounts of water. He could see schools of small fish frantically trying to escape.

(What? Is it already sucking in fish?)

That pipe was directly connected to important systems such as the reactor cooling, propulsion, and oxygen supply. He doubted it would be designed to so easily take in unwanted materials.

Be that as it may, they had to do what they had come to do.

Swimming with balled up bed sheets was not easy, but they continued on toward the Megalodiver.

Quenser instructed Heivia with some gestures that he was unsure were getting through properly.

(If we get too close, we'll be sucked in, too. We only have to leave the bed sheets on a route it'll probably pass through. From there, it'll take itself out.)

As he feared, the gestures did not seem to get through to the other boy.

Heivia tried to continue onwards, so Quenser made a show of spreading out the bed sheets and letting them go.

The balled up bed sheets expanded all at once.

He ignored Heivia's surprised look and swam away. Heivia seemed to finally catch on because he let go of his own bed sheets and did as Quenser had done.

Quenser did not know what a safe distance was, so he arbitrarily fell back about 150 meters and observed from there.

Before long, the time arrived.

(That's the Megalodiver. The Bamboo Pipe is sucking up the bed sheets!!)

It looked like they were being pulled up by a magnet.

The group of spread-out sheets moved unnaturally as they were sucked up toward the end of the Bamboo Pipe. The several dozen cloths covered up the end of the pipe and Quenser was reminded of a toy he had made as a child. He had made a toy rapier by attaching layer after layer of paper scraps covered in paste. Even without a clear core, it had been quite solid. Something similar was now happening on that water intake.

They had done it.

It was over.

They had torn out the Object's Achilles' heel. The water was needed for the reactor cooling, the water jet propulsion, and the electrolysis oxygen supply, so they had forcibly shut down those crucial systems.

Or so it should have been.

(…?)

The Megalodiver did not stop.

The Bamboo Pipe sticking down continued to move with tremendous speed. That meant the giant mass on the surface was still moving about as it fought.

Something white colored his vision.

It was a group of bed sheets. Just those sheets were skillfully removed from the water intake that had supposedly been taking in several tons of water every second.

(What? Did it stop sucking in the water for a second when it detected something there? Is the system that well-made!? No, wait. Is that…?)

Something floated in the ocean along with the many sheets.

It looked like a large yet thin disk.

Heivia tapped on Quenser's shoulder and pointed straight up.

They could not talk here, so he was suggesting surfacing for a strategy meeting.

Quenser did so, but he had forgotten about the sticky macromolecule zone two meters from the surface.

"Bhbfh!? Bgbgh bkh!!"

"Cough cough!! Wah ha ha ha ha ha! Welcome, Quenser, to the monster zone where you lose all dignity as a human being!! Ew, it got in my nose!"

They could not waste time, so the two creepy lotion monsters exchanged their opinions amid the orange downpour.

"It looks like the bed sheet plan didn't work. It sucked them in, but they immediately detached!"

"There was a weird disk in there with them and it was just as thick as the Bamboo Pipe."

The intense battle between the Baby Magnum and the Megalodiver continued a short distance away. Angel wing-like water fired from the nozzles on the Megalodiver's back as it freely moved around and it was clearly slowly pressing in toward the Baby Magnum.

It looked like the princess was the inferior of the two.

That showed immense skill given that most of the Megalodiver's sensors were sealed off. Most importantly, there was no

deviation in its movements despite the continuous irregular situations. That was the result of a powerful will backed by real skill. However, Quenser knew the princess would be upset if he said that aloud.

"That disk was a filter."

"What?"

"It's a filter to keep fish and other things from getting in. It might be the same as with a water purifier. At any rate, the filter is probably a few centimeters or a few millimeters thick and the Bamboo Pipe is actually just a bunch of them extending down."

"Wait, wait. Are you serious?"

"The outermost filter stops unwanted materials form getting in. Once it reaches its limit, the old filter is abandoned along with whatever is clogging it up. That's how it's made."

"That means we can't plug up the Bamboo Pipe no matter how much we try! It's just like a roll of cookie dough with an image running through the entire thing. No matter how much we attack, the very end will be cut away and a new filter will show itself!"

"…"

Quenser thought as he floated in the orange ocean with the rain pouring down on him.

As he did, a voice he had completely forgotten about came from his radio.

"U-u-um! This is Mariage Nightcap!!"

"Huh? Where are you?"

"On the Summer Vacation! I was onboard when it seems everyone started on an emotional suicide attack, but I have no connection to the Winchell family!!"

That was quite a tragedy.

Quenser knew he would not be happy if someone told him to die for that filthy boy.

"Anyway, I really don't want to die and I'll do anything to make sure I don't!!"

"Thanks for the world's lamest kind of determination. You really are a slut. So what do you need?"

"Well, I thought you could use this…"

"…?"

At first, Quenser looked puzzled at the term he heard over the radio, but his expression lit up when he realized what she meant.

"Amazing!! There is a possibility there. I'm so glad I rescued you from prison!!"

"Heh…eh heh heh. We still have to figure out how to solidify it, though."

"We can handle that."

"P-please do something about this. If this doesn't work, I'm going to surrender to the other side."

"You really will switch sides whenever it suits you, won't you? Do you want me to send you back to prison?" After a pause, Quenser brought the radio back to his mouth. "Summer Vacation, can you hear me? We would like some additional materials. We only have soap-like rations, so we can't rely on them. Your ship is our only option, so will you help us?"

"Hey, Quenser. What are you trying to do?"

"It's actually Mariage's idea. The infinite filter prevents anything but smooth seawater from entering the Megalodiver. No, it might even filter out some of the salt content."

"Get to the point!"

"If it isn't something solid, it can get through." He wiped the thick seawater from his face. "A normal, smooth liquid will slip right through the filter, so we can perform a time-delay attack if we have a substance that will solidify once it enters the Megalodiver. That way, our attack can ignore the filter."

"Where are we supposed to find that convenient glue-like substance? And how long does the water stay inside the Object after being sucked in?"

"The concept is simple, but you're right. I want to know exactly how long it takes from the water being sucked in to it being sprayed from the water jets. Summer Vacation!"

"What do you need prepared?" asked Karen.

"A few things. First, can you still use the ship's guns?"

"Seventy percent of our armaments are still functioning. We can fire the main guns without delay."

"Load them with fluorescent paint rounds and fire near the Megalodiver. Those are the rounds used when recording a reference point for the guns. Can you do that?"

"They can be automatically loaded, but it will take two minutes before we can fire."

Heivia grabbed Quenser's radio and cut in.

"Do it in one. That's an order!!"

"Zukyun"

"What kind of onomatopoeia was that!? If you're gonna speak, use actual words!!"

"W-well, as a maid, I have a bit of a nosebleed, so-… That is to say, we will force them in manually and finish within thirty seconds."

Heivia handed back the radio and the guns fired as announced.

The orange of dawn surrounding the Megalodiver was transformed into a disturbingly bright green and the Object took in that water.

"Keep count, Heivia."

"48, 49…now! It took 50 seconds from being sucked in!!"

"Now we know. We need a liquid that solidifies in 25 to 50 seconds."

"What kind of liquid is that? Instant glue would be too fast and normal glue would be too slow!"

"We have something a lot closer by." Quenser brought the radio to his mouth amid the downpour. "Summer Vacation, we need all the milk you have. How much is that?"

"Milk?" Heivia initially looked confused. "Oh, I get it. It uses the cold seawater to cool its scorching reactor. The huge temperature difference could create something like the film on top of hot milk."

"We have about a month's worth. We only just resupplied, so it is quite a lot."

"Bring it all out. Put it in a case and drop it down! And one other thing!!"

After he explained, Karen sounded doubtful.

"Are you sure?"

"Please. Mariage's idea alone isn't enough!"

Travelling along the sticky ocean surface would be a waste of time, so Quenser and Heivia put their scuba mouthpieces back in and dove down to return to the Summer Vacation.

When the two monsters burst from the ocean surface, Karen's scream and heavy machinegun fire filled the air once more.

After resolving the misunderstanding, the two boys started collecting the milk tanks that had been lowered down.

However, the tanks were not attached to life jackets or floats. After all, they weighed three to four tons. Having learned from the mistake that had led to the boys being unable to gather all the bed sheets, Karen and the maids used a wire to lower a life boat filled with milk tanks.

It was surreal seeing a boat packed full of the thick metal tanks seen on farms.

"I have the rope for the life boat. Heivia, where should I attach it?"

"Give it here. By the way, will this be okay? The motor was already screaming at moving through this thick goop, so can we really tow all this?"

After attaching the rubber boat and life boat with a thick rope, Quenser and Heivia climbed aboard the rubber boat. All that remained was using its motor to forcibly pull the other along.

"Let's go, Quenser."

"Sure."

The motor let out an even louder scream than before. Not only was the ocean so thick, but the weight had been increased. They had no idea when it would start spewing smoke and it was possible they could not rely on it to bring them back.

What they had seen underwater was nothing compared to the commotion on the surface due to the two Objects moving about at maddening speeds. They would be smashed to pieces if one of the Objects mistakenly struck them. Those 200 thousand ton masses were moving at 500 kph, so it would go far beyond a head-on collision with a train.

"This isn't good. We can't get close!"

"We don't have to get too close. If we read the current and pour it in there, it'll be taken to the Megalodiver on its own."

"You aren't suggesting we open up all the lids and pour it in one by one, are you? How many of these things do you think there are!?"

"Then cut the wire connecting the boats, Heivia. I'll blow it up with this."

Quenser stabbed an electric fuse into a plastic explosive and tossed it into the center of the life boat they were towing.

With nothing controlling it, the life boat floated helpless on the ocean current.

However, it turned out they did not even need to use the bomb.

The Megalodiver cut in at tremendous speed and plowed through the boat and the countless milk containers loaded on it.

The entire area was filled with a thick milky-white.

"That's quite the milk bath. I think this counts as pollution. Won 't this place smell like a rotten rag in a week?"

"Oh, damn. Blowing up the boat with the bomb would've been better. And the entire planet's environment will fall apart if Ichirei Shikon's plan succeeds, so this is the better alternative."

They waited a while after the life boat filled with milk was smashed to pieces.

Finally, something happened.

"The color's changed," observed Heivia.

He was focusing on the multiple nozzles on the back of the Megalodiver that formed the angel wings.

"The water jet is turning white!"

"That means it's taken in the milk."

"But this isn't enough, right? If it just ejects it, we've failed! It has to turn into the film on hot milk and clog up the pipes!!"

"Don't panic. We have more than one chance. The seawater it shoots out will be sucked back in and reused. We can afford some level of failure."

Even so, the Megalodiver showed no sign of stopping.

"The hot milk film doesn't form when the milk is heated," groaned Heivia. "It's when it cools down again. The pipes used to cool the reactor may be hot, but that isn't enough! It doesn't matter how long we wait around!!"

"No." Quenser rejected his horrible friend's lament with a single word. "We still have a chance."

"How can you be so calm!? …Wait. What have you been doing for a while now?"

"I said we were using milk, but I never said anything about using the film that forms on hot milk."

Quenser was working on something.

A cooler sat on one end of the rubber boat. After opening it and checking inside, he inflated the life jackets stored in the life boat and attached them around the cooler.

Heivia caught a glimpse of the contents just before Quenser closed the cooler. He had seen some fresh yellow items.

"I made an additional order from Karen," said Quenser as he worked.

"What are those? No…wait…"

Heivia frowned as Quenser pulled a plastic explosive from his backpack, stabbed in a radio-controlled electric fuse, and attached it to the side of the milk tank packed full of yellow balls.

At that point, he finally caught on.

"Wait, wait, wait! Are you solidifying the milk with lemons!?"

Quenser tossed the cooler and life jackets into the ocean and grabbed his radio with his sticky and slippery hand.

"There's more than one way to solidify milk and you can accomplish it with items you can find anywhere. Those maids seemed to know a lot about tea, so I knew they would have some."

"Come to think of it, that's used to make cottage cheese."

"Milk can be thickened by mixing in lemon juice. This method is faster and more certain because it doesn't need heating or cooling."

The cooler slowly moved away.

It could not pursue the Object moving across the ocean at tremendous speeds, so they had to wait for the enemy to approach it.

That time soon arrived.

The Megalodiver jumped straight up to avoid the princess's coilgun and it landed on the ocean surface as if crushing a landmine.

Strength gathered in Quenser's thumb as if he were hitting the switch for some giant system.

"This will slip past its filter and the milk will solidify inside the Object. It can't fail."

As they watched, the Megalodiver's movements ground to a halt.

A small explosion occurred right next to it and the scattered lemon juice was directly swallowed up by the water intake without being diluted in the massive amount of seawater.

The chemical reaction occurred quickly.

The pectin in the lemons combined with the milk to form a gelatinous substance.

The water jet propulsion device that shot out seawater like giant angel wings came to a stop, but that was only the tip of the iceberg. Inside the cooling pipes located next to the reactor, the solidified

milk was burned by the immense heat. The scorched milk stuck to the pipes despite the great flow of water and the clog grew larger and larger. It formed a fatal blockage much like cholesterol clogging up a human's artery.

The JPlevelMHD reactor was the Object's "heart". Without the necessary cooling, it ran out of control.

Quenser set his radio to an open frequency and spoke loudly to anyone who could hear.

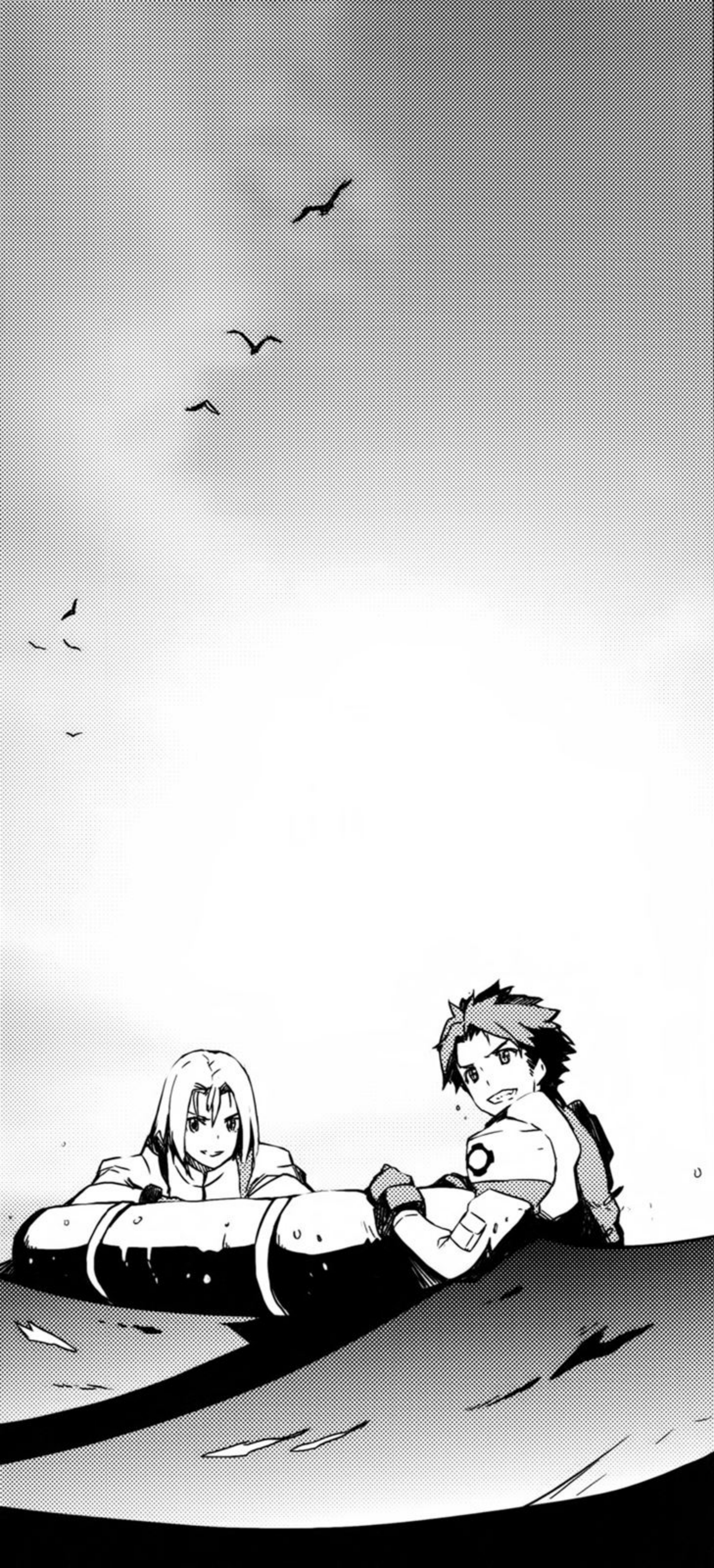
"Get down and close your eyes!! The reactor is about to explode !!"

It took less than ten seconds.

A deafening blast and a blinding flash of light filled the orange dyed ocean.

The rubber boat was violently flipped over and Quenser and Heivia were once more turned into slimy monsters.

"Bghh!!"



"Pkhh!!"

Everyone there wanted an explanation and they looked toward the true monster through binoculars or ultra-long range cameras.

Quenser was afraid their ugly state would give them a weird nickname. Something like the UMA boys.

The two of them waited for the rescue helicopter while grabbing onto the edge of the capsized boat so as not to drown.

The intense rain shower ended unnaturally quickly as if a tap had been turned off. It happened precisely when the Megalodiver exploded.

Heivia then asked a sudden question.

"Hey, Quenser. Why did you use an open frequency for that final transmission?"

"I could've used a military frequency, but I didn't know the situation on the Summer Vacation. It would've reached the bridge, but I wasn't sure it would reach the other maids working on the deck. That's why I used an open one."

"I see." Heivia continued while holding onto the boat with his sticky and slippery hands. "What if that gave the enemy Pilot Elite a chance to escape?"

"We can just capture her. Plus, we need someone to ask about Ichirei Shikon."

"There you go again. You always act so benevolent when the Elite is a girl."

"The body doubles I saw up close weren't very good looking, so I'm hoping the real one is different."

"She's not a girl with spiral glasses, so it won't be that convenient. I bet you 100 euros she's just as ugly."

"You're on. I've got 100 on her being a beauty."

They were cut off by the arrival of a large transport helicopter.

That was proof that the threat of anti-air lasers was gone.

In other words, the battle was over.

Epilogue

"A new treaty is needed."

That comment led Frolaytia to hold her head in her hands.

She was on the bridge of the Scarlet Princess which she was using as a flagship. The low voice of the colonel who acted like a sister-in-law came from her personal laptop which was not military equipment.

"That…Amaterasu was it? Anyway, the global weather control weapon. Work is underway to remove the Twelve Earthly Branches reactors from the ocean, but it is still undetermined whether they will be returned to the Capitalist Corporations. The Megalodiver controlled them, so its loss seems to mean the remnants of Ichirei Shkon cannot control or detonate them. However, it would be a problem if the other world powers constructed ocean fortresses at those points and dropped reactors down. Something is needed to put an end to this."

"I'm sorry about all this."

"There is no reason for you to apologize. Ichirei Shikon is the one at fault in all this."

"The self-defense PMC that they were using seems to have lost the will to fight. We're providing food and beds for a large number of POWs, so our accountants are starting to wish we had just killed them all."

"Well, these are nothing more than people who thought they would all be led to heaven if they followed a charismatic leader. With the Object and leader both gone, it's only natural they are straying. Perhaps we should compliment them for being intelligent enough to not throw a temper tantrum and keep fighting."

Incidentally, Frolaytia had intended to order the Object to relentlessly hunt them down had they tried that. She was merciful enough to respond to the white flag signal, but she would not hold back if faced with continued resistance. While the modern battlefield was clean, it was not necessarily kind.

The only remaining problem was Amaterasu.

Or rather, the possibility of a copycat system being created.

"Will anyone really enter into an international treaty in this era of war?" asked Frolaytia. "Everyone will want to expand their military. Even if it is highly destructive, won't they want to copy this possible new weapon?"

"Strange as it may seem, all of the top level military commanders stand at the peak of politics rather than the military. They do not want to destroy the world, so they will quickly work together if the possibility of a desert planet is presented to them. They're even more likely to work together when there is a common enemy they can defeat together."

"You mean Ichirei Shikon will be made to take responsibility?"

"The Capitalist Corporations have already purged them. Of course, if your report is true, an international search is pointless."

Ichirei Shikon was a prediction search engine not even on the level of an AI.

The entire incident was similar to terrorists being moved to action by the diary left by some long dead geniuses.

The true masterminds were all in their graves which made it difficult to say who to put on trial.

"Difficult to bear, isn't it?"

"It really is," answered Frolaytia.

"This incident reminded me that the Island Nation seems open on the surface, but it's actually a giant black box. I suppose I should expect nothing less from the group of engineers who first released Objects on the world. Just the notes left behind by the dead were enough to cause a war twenty or thirty years later. I can 't even imagine what else lies hidden there."

"And yet as a black box, it holds too much possibility to be cast aside."

"It really is a mixed blessing." The old colonel breathed a heavy sigh on the screen. "This will probably all be resolved where neither of us can see it. We won't even be able to view the reports.

There's someone originally from the Island Nation in your unit, isn't there? Talk to them while you can. A gag order might be put into effect before long."

"I won't be able to tell anyone, so what's the point?"

"That much harassment can't hurt, if you ask me. Your unit was the one that actually worked to put out this fire."

The transmission ended without any of the usual complaining.

That showed just how cornered the old colonel felt.

Frolaytia placed her long, narrow Island Nation kiseru in her mouth and spoke.

"It isn't the center of the world, but it'll probably be one of the more important points. Scary to think it's left to its own devices so much."

The old maintenance woman guided in the Baby Magnum as it returned.

This had been another horrible battle. Three of the seven main cannons had been twisted and blown away. Just because it was a first generation, the higher ups tended to use it on dangerous missions as if it were expendable. That did not please someone who worked to maintain it.

When the princess left the Object, a female maintenance soldier placed a towel over her shoulder and someone else handed her a bottle of sports drink. She was being treated like this was the end of a marathon. In truth, the slender girl was even more exhausted than that.

The princess spotted the familiar old woman upon stepping onto the small aircraft carrier's deck.

She approached on slightly unsteady footing and spoke honestly.

"That was a close one."

She would not show this side of herself to Quenser, Heivia, Frolaytia, or the others in her unit.

"If Quenser and Heivia hadn't ended that, I don't know if I could have won."

"But you survived. Using what opportunities you have and making it back alive is another part of an Elite's skill," replied the old woman. "No easy miracles occur on the battlefield. You need some skill to grasp the good fortune that does present itself."

Hearing that, a very slight smile appeared on the princess's face that was pale from exhaustion.

"It seems that kid used an open frequency for that last transmission," continued the old woman.

"Is that so?"

"Thanks to that, Ichirei Shikon's Elite managed to eject just before the reactor exploded and the intelligence department managed to capture them. By the way, it seems this Elite was female."

"I need to go punch anything and everything I can find."

The princess found some extra energy somewhere and stomped away.

After watching her departing back for a while, the old woman pulled a handheld device from her pocket.

She switched it on and displayed the chat log from her conversation with Ichirei Shikon.

She displayed the last vestiges of the man she had once walked alongside.

"The future you dreamed of was destroyed," she said quietly.

She operated the device with her fingertips and erased all the logs in a few seconds.

With that, she erased Ayami Cherryblossom's lingering regret.

"Although I have a feeling you saw visions of this as well."

Afterword

If you've been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

The theme this time was the Island Nation. As this is a work of fiction, I added in a bunch of crazy things to make it all seem more uncanny. The small Island Nation has few resources and little food yet takes on the world with great technological ability. I created this story while wondering if there was a large trick to overturn those established facts.

The idea of a meteorological weapon has shown up in this series before, but this novel increased the scale to include a global weather control weapon. I read some material on ocean temperature for this novel and it's quite frightening. The term may sound peaceful enough, but everything I read about it brought nothing but fear. All scientific materials bring a mixture of curiosity and fear, but it's not often the scales are tipped so heavily toward one side. It was to the point that I added it to a personal list of things not to search. I absolutely do not recommend it. … However, you can't do anything about it if you don't face it first.

To bring out the unique feeling of the Island Nation, I put some thought into the names of the Objects and other things. I thought about giving them warship-like names, but the Capitalist Corporations framework has a rule about giving Objects female names. I also had the Object use the tatami shield, gave the final boss multiple forms, had body doubles, put in a steam-filled bath

scene, and plenty of other things. Adding in those things made me wonder what exactly the unique feeling of the Island Nation is.

Also, this novel had all the battles take place on the ocean. I personally think the most beautiful ocean scenery is the ocean dyed orange, so I set the final battle at dawn. What did all of you think?

I had thought about a diving Object pretty early on. Despite being a submarine, it isn't hiding at all and it can shoot down nuclear torpedoes or whatever else with its lasers. It would quietly rule over all life while manipulating the weather of every continent from the dark ocean bottom. I feel like I gave it some symbolic elements of a giant monster. I would be delighted if you loved it enough to come up with some other ways of defeating it.

By the way, I could have made a more sentimental story by mixing in memories of the old woman and the mastermind when they were younger, but I decided not to. I thought it would build up the worldview better to leave how the Island Nation turned out that way as a sort of black box. I hope you understand.

I give my thanks to my illustrator, Nagi Ryou-san, and my editors, Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. I apologize for all the unreasonable requests I made this time. From the small details to the gigantic weapons, it was all a lot of trouble, so I thank them for sticking with me.

I also give my thanks to the readers. This story used an entire novel for the defeat of a single Object. This was simply the story of slaying a giant foe. I hope you enjoyed it.

And I will end this here.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

Maybe I should have made it a volcanic island so it could have been a real hot spring.

-Kamachi Kazuma